

## **Rules of Engagement:**

**Investigating the transformation of unwritten social protocols into screen-based representations through hybridity and liminal practices.**

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## Abstract

By deconstructing the filmmaking process - a process that employs both documentary and fictional conventions - this project aims to uncover the complex relationship between actual and screen-based reality. It examines how the process of filmmaking itself further blurs the boundary between the two, and via its position between moving image art practice and narrative filmmaking, the research explores hybridity in screen-based practices across disciplinary boundaries.

This practice-led inquiry resulted in a 22-minute-long semi-fictional film *Rules of Engagement*, which consisted of three filmic vignettes depicting everyday scenarios wherein individuals come up against unwritten or tacit social protocols.

The thesis takes a deconstructive approach: examining, dissecting and disassembling every phase of the process of filmmaking. Each section addresses a particular question, which contributes to the full enquiry. The text is structured around a number of conversations and interviews, transcripts from source material, critical discussions, a detailed breakdown of the screenplay, critical debriefs with key collaborators and feedback on the editing process as a semi-fictional conversation.

Finally, a series of public screenings and talks isolated particular critical questions relevant to the work and to the thesis. This written contextualisation explores the relationship between a variety of cultural sources — moving image artworks, narrative film and television drama, and how these elements — both fictional and nonfictional, contribute to a growing body of work which complicates the boundaries and operates across the (moving image) divide between fine art and narrative filmmaking.

The research and the film *Rules of Engagement*, makes its contribution to the field of contemporary art practice and narrative filmmaking via the careful and forensic uncovering, exposing and embracing of both explicit and tacit knowledge within the processes of filmmaking.

Dedicated to my husband Paul Moss.

1975 - 2019.

Forever your *PhD-C*.

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*Rules of Engagement* went on a tour of public screenings at Regent Street Cinema, CCA, Tyneside Cinema, The Maltings and The Tetley, with subsequent in-conversation events hosted by Philip Ilson, Harriet Warman, Michael Pattison, Peter Taylor and Bryony Bond.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

This text is a critical enquiry and contextualisation of the making of *Rules of Engagement* - a 22-minute-long film. Through deconstructing the processes and methods behind the making of the work, which employs documentary and fiction conventions, this research asks: how can the process of filmmaking be deployed to complicate the fluctuating border between daily life and screen-based representations? Via its position between moving image art practice and narrative filmmaking, the research further explores hybridity in screen-based practices across disciplinary boundaries.

Three core ideas, propositions and approaches support the enquiry and underpin this research:

1. **Screen representations of the real/reality are not binaries:** Screen-based narrative permeates daily life and, in turn, quotidian reality is transformed into fictional or factual moving image content.<sup>1</sup> To investigate this circular relationship, I gather stories from everyday situations and re-appropriate and re-interpret these as familiar screen-based constructs.<sup>2</sup>
2. **A recollection is a narrative version of an event:** Real experiences are mediated, and to an extent fictionalised at the moment they are re-told. Do the familiar narrative structures that surround us, in the form of moving image media, inform the narratives that we construct of ourselves? To examine the transformation from experience to a story, I work with real-life accounts that explore notions of identity and group behaviour, in order to uncover links and discrepancies between reality and fiction.
3. **De-familiarisation can be a tool to critically explore both dominant screen-based narratives and the everyday.** I de-familiarise the familiar in two ways: firstly, by stripping filmic works of tropes associated with conventional screen-based content, and secondly, by heightening the everyday scenarios that I depict.

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<sup>1</sup> With moving image content I am referring to screen-based media, which includes television and cinema. The content itself can be fictional or factual.

<sup>2</sup> With familiar screen-based constructs I refer to readily available content from television and cinema.

The above ideas and questions have grown out of, and are integral to, my existing and previous practice-led creative activity. Importantly for this research, these ideas and questions link to a number of prepositions across a theoretical spectrum, which I will introduce and discuss throughout this introduction.

## **1.1 Background**

I arrived at this research after ten years of independent art and film practice outside of an academic context. I found myself at a critical juncture: my work had been exhibited and screened in both gallery and cinema contexts. However, instead of operating across the disciplinary boundaries, I was operating two parallel artistic practices - trying to shoehorn my work to fit within the constraints of each discipline and inevitably failing to belong to either. I needed an alternative platform for further research and a critical study of my modes of production.

Thematically *Rules of Engagement* built on from previous investigations into ritualised communication and the invisible social protocols and unspoken conventions that create cohesion.<sup>3</sup> I wanted to find out what were the 'rules of engagement' of everyday social interaction and what happens when something or someone breaks these protocols. I started with collected real-life accounts from individuals of everyday experiences of ill-fitting social situations. These accounts formed the basis of *Rules of Engagement*, a film comprised of three distinct semi-fictional filmic vignettes.

The research, which underpinned the development, production and presentation of the work, and which is examined in this text, initially looked to uncover relationships between social protocols and commodity-driven, media-saturated culture. However, the unfolding of the research process exposed narratives more concerned with mundane and everyday scenarios than with commodity culture. This shifted the focus to relationships between social protocols and screen-based representations of these in everyday contexts – an investigation, which, in itself, blurs the boundaries between the real and representation. This refocus was particularly apt as the approach that underpinned the film itself – cinematic treatment of real-life accounts, deliberately plays

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<sup>3</sup> By social protocols I am referring to unspoken social conventions, which I will discuss further later in this chapter.

with the real and the represented; in other words, ***the methods used reflect the questions asked.***

*Rules of Engagement* simultaneously explores real everyday scenarios and screen-based representations of these: firstly, the film is set in familiar day-to-day environments (home, workplace, pub), and secondly, the screenplay appropriates and re-interprets dramatic narrative constructs often set in these environments (documentary re-construction, soap opera, chamber drama). Through this, the film is deliberately situated between the real and representation and therefore, it is appropriate that the questions posed and this written account of the making of the film, similarly explore the lines between the real and representation or quasi-fictional in order to reflect and unpeel all layers of the work. This is achieved by way of including transcripts, fictionalised conversations, discussions with actors and scripts, which, taken as a whole, help to track the methodological development of the project itself.

Moreover, by employing conventional filmmaking methods while consciously engaging with fine art practice and thinking, this research investigates hybridity and liminality in screen-based practices. The film is therefore set in the parallel yet distinctive contexts of art and cinema.<sup>4</sup>

Through this mechanism, I am attempting to uncover and expose the developed intuition and ‘tacit knowledge’ that informs my professional practice and decision-making.<sup>5</sup> Therefore the ‘coincidental’ and ‘anecdotal’ form part of this written text just as it plays an essential role within artistic practice. Just as the work is situated between

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<sup>4</sup> *Rules of Engagement* was screened at a series of public screenings at art and cinema venues, the tour went to Regent Street Cinema (London), CCA (Glasgow), Tyneside Cinema (Newcastle Upon Tyne), The Maltings (Berwick Upon Tweed) and The Tetley (Leeds).

<sup>5</sup> Intuition as part of practice and knowledge generation has been written about extensively, for example *The Intuitive Practitioner* focuses on the profession of teaching and explores the relationship between rational and intuition; or *Tacit Knowledge in Professional Practice* explores ‘learning by doing’ or the process of turning tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge.

Terry Atkinson & Guy Claxton, *The Intuitive Practitioner: On the Value of Not Always Knowing What One is Doing*. (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2000).

Robert J. Sternberg and Joseph A. Horvath (eds.), *Tacit Knowledge in Professional Practice* (London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1999).

fiction and reality, the practice inevitably becomes intertwined with real life, and instead of trying to minimise the impact of daily existence on the work, this text looks to embrace it.

Filmmaking is by its very nature a practical process and this written contextualisation will reflect that. Finances, for example, limit filmmaking and this limitation will impact on the development and execution of the work. Where this has happened, whether it has resulted in compromise or has paved the way for artistic invention and alternative solutions, it is important to recognise this. Furthermore, filmmaking is built around collaboration and each key collaborator impacts on the work. As well as the creative team around the production, and performers in front of the camera, *Rules of Engagement* has been reliant on collaboration from the beginning - particularly with the participants who were willing to share their stories. Therefore, it has been important to incorporate the practical limitations of the project as well as the different conceptual, collaborative and critical voices that have been involved from its inception - thus directly informing the resultant and accompanying text.

## **1.2 Critical and Theoretical Context**

To contextualise this research, I have looked at how the core ideas behind the work, as well as the themes explored and artistic strategies, link to a number of prepositions across the theoretical, critical and artistic practice spectrum.

### **1.2.1 Unwritten social protocols**

The film *Rules of Engagement* is centred on ideas around unwritten social protocols and how these protocols either result in notions of 'outsiderdom' or in a sense of belonging. Initially, my interest in this area emerged from an autobiographical space i.e. my position as an outsider operating in between two nationalities, native Swedish and adopted British identities.

To get a deeper understanding of this phenomenon, and to better define the concept, I turned to certain sociological writings that explore various aspects of it. The sociologist Irving Goffman has written extensively about the roles performed in everyday life; for example: "*When one individual enters the presence of others, he will want to discover the facts of the situation. [...] To uncover fully the factual nature of the situation, it would be*

*necessary for the individual to know all the relevant social data about the others. [...] Full information of this order is rarely available; in its absence, the individual tends to employ substitutes – cues, tests, hints, expressive gestures, status symbols, etc. – as predictive devices.”*<sup>6</sup>

Eric W. Rothenbuhler also writes about the role of ritual in the everyday and the need for rules for human co-existence: *“Rituals show up in small ways, they are sprinkled throughout our everyday interactions. We are in the habit of such things and seldom think about them, but there they are. [...] Ritual is necessary to social order. It is in the symbolic means of crafting the self in social shape, of putting the will in the order of the social. Without it we would have no means of social order between happy cooperation, rational agreement, and brute coercion.”*<sup>7</sup>

Zygmunt Bauman also writes on being constrained by these social orders and the consequences when the individual breaks with conformity; he writes: *“if we break rules that are meant to guide people’s conduct, then we may be punished. The act of punishment is intended as a confirmation that we are responsible for our actions. Rules in this sense, orient not only our actions, but also in their coordination with others who can, in their turn, anticipate how we are likely to act. Without this in place, communication and understanding in everyday life are inconceivable.”*<sup>8</sup>

Goffman, Rothenburg and Bauman presented important studies on the role of social protocols in everyday life, which fed into my background research into the innate need to perform the roles expected of us, the need for rituals as part of social order and the drive towards - and consequences of - breaking prevailing social protocols.

In my quest to further pin down a working thematic, I turned to cinematic depictions of social protocols. Two works that became important were Reuben Östlund’s *Involuntary*<sup>9</sup>,

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<sup>6</sup> Irving Goffman, ‘The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life’ 1956 in Lemert, Charles & Branaman, Ann (eds.) *The Goffman Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 1997), p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> Eric W. Rothenbuhler, *Ritual Communication: from Everyday Conversation to Mediated Ceremony* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1998), p. 130.

<sup>8</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, ‘Oneself with Others’ in Bauman & May *Thinking Sociologically*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edn. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers 2001), p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> *Involuntary (De ofrivilliga)*, Dir. Reuben Östlund, Cineropa 2008.

about group pressure and Joanna Hogg's *Archipelago*<sup>10</sup>, which is concerned with family dynamics. *Involuntary* chronicles group behaviour in a darkly comedic manner through five seemingly unconnected stories: a man who gets injured by fireworks at a dinner party but refuses to get treatment, a bus driver who stops the journey until someone on the bus confesses to committing minor vandalism, a man who unwillingly performs fellatio to impress his friends, two intoxicated teenage girls who harass a young man and a school teacher who is under peer pressure in the staffroom.<sup>11</sup> Each scene is a continuous shot with a camera placed at a distance from its characters. The film doesn't offer a narrative conclusion but highlights the unwritten rules that govern group behaviour and the pressure it puts on its members. *Archipelago*<sup>12</sup> is set during a middle-class family vacation in the Scilly Isles, each family member goes through an inner crisis, which is swept under the carpet. The film explores a dynamic bogged down by what is left unsaid and the friction caused by outmoded social protocols within a family unit.<sup>13</sup> *Archipelago* functions as a cinematic 'chamber play' - a genre that became a crucial structural reference in the construction of *Rules of Engagement*.<sup>14</sup>

Both films realistically depict unwritten rules of interaction and share some stylistic devices and methodologies, which influenced or served as analogies for some of the artistic choices I made. Both films employ an episodic narrative structure, telling the stories through long takes with a static camera and using the landscape or built environment to establish a sense of place for each character. They both utilise professionals and non-actors.

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<sup>10</sup> *Archipelago*, Dir. Joanna Hogg, Curzon Artificial Eye, 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Synopsis paraphrased from Philip French 'Involuntary – Review' Guardian, 31.10.2010. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2010/oct/31/involuntary-ruben-ostlund-review> [accessed on 28.05.2018]

<sup>12</sup> *Archipelago*, Dir. Joanna Hogg, Curzon Artificial Eye, 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Synopsis paraphrased from Peter Bradshaw 'Archipelago – review' in *The Guardian*, 03.03.2011. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2011/mar/03/archipelago-review> [accessed on 28.05.2018]

<sup>14</sup> *Archipelago* has been labeled a 'cinematic chamber play' or 'chamber drama' in several reviews, for example Jonathan Romney 'Film of the month: Archipelago', *British Film Institute*. <http://old.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/review/5961> [accessed 20.11.18]



### 1.2.2 Commodity and media culture

Commodity and media culture serve as a constant backdrop to my practice, especially important during the initial development of *Rules of Engagement*.<sup>15</sup> In previous works, I have explored anxiety in consumer-driven, and media-saturated environments, fear as a consumer motivator and notions of identity as part of commodity culture.

For example: *The List*<sup>16</sup> was a durational performance and video installation, which consisted of an expanding list of necessary or desirable items delivered by an actor using a teleprompter. The performance and scrolling teleprompter were then projected back into the space.

The short film *SYSTEM*<sup>17</sup> explored fear and anxieties in retail environments via a psychological thriller set entirely inside a shopping centre.

*Once we get there it is already over*<sup>18</sup> - a series of monochrome drawings - explored the inevitable emptiness of commodity culture, depicting images from shop interiors to lotto numbers that all allude to consumer desire.

While *Rules of Engagement* doesn't directly explore commodity or media culture, the research does consider the space between the real and representations of the real, which are partially perpetuated by commercially driven media content that saturates daily life.

Jonathan Beller's *The Cinematic Mode of Production*<sup>19</sup> examines the relationship between media, social organisation and production. Beller brings together 20<sup>th</sup> century theory on late capitalism, commodity culture and film, linking the act of consuming cinema (and

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<sup>15</sup> To gain a wider understanding of the concept I have surveyed related theories or critiques of commodity culture and media driven conformity; for example Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's critique of the culture industry in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* or Herbert Marcuse positing the notion of bourgeois society separating culture from the everyday world and how that ultimately defuses culture's potential for social change in the essay *The Affirmative Character of Culture*.

<sup>16</sup> *The List*, Cecilia Stenbom, installation, 2014.

<sup>17</sup> *SYSTEM*, Cecilia Stenbom, single channel film, 2014.

<sup>18</sup> *Once we get there it is already over*, Cecilia Stenbom, pencil on paper, 2013

<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Beller, *The Cinematic Mode of Production – attention economy and the society of the spectacle*. Lebanon: University Press of New England, 2006).

other moving image media) to an 'attention economy' where the consumer of moving image media is paid in pleasure and affective intensity, in return for their attention, which in itself is a saleable commodity.<sup>20</sup> Beller links screen-based narratives and everyday life; he writes: "*Cinema and its succeeding (if not simultaneous) formations [...] are de-territorialised factories in which spectators work, that is, in which we perform value productive labour. It is in and through the cinematic image and its legacy, the gossamer imagery arising out of a matrix of socio-psycho-material relations, that we make our lives*".<sup>21</sup>

The sub-title of Beller's thesis – *Attention Economy and The Society of The Spectacle*, pays homage to Guy Debord's seminal book *Society of The Spectacle*<sup>22</sup>, which provides another useful link between commodity-driven culture and perceptions of reality and, in Debord's case, how this has created an inversion of the real and the represented. Debord's book starts with "*In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation*".<sup>23</sup> Debord himself utilised found and repurposed material (*détournement*) in his filmic work, and writes: "*these stolen films [...] are used, regardless of whatever their original meaning may have been, to represent the rectification of the "artistic inversion of life"*".<sup>24</sup> In relation to the above, in my work I re-appropriate familiar screen constructs as part of new fictions; although I do not use found footage, there is some correlation with Debord.

Influenced by Debord's ideas, Jean Baudrillard, (although he later rejected them<sup>25</sup>), developed the concept of hyperreality.<sup>26</sup> Baudrillard discusses the inability to distinguish reality from a simulation of it, he writes: "*The impossibility of rediscovering*

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., pp. 302-208.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p.1.

<sup>22</sup> Guy Debord, *Society of the spectacle* (London: Rebel Press, 2006).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p.7

<sup>24</sup> Guy Debord & Ken Knabb (ed), *Complete Cinematic Works* (Edinburgh: AK Press), p. 223.

<sup>25</sup> Steven Best, 'The Commodification of Reality and the Reality of Commodification: Baudrillard, Debord and Postmodern Theory' in Kellner, *Douglas Baudrillard: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1994), p.42.

<sup>26</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), pp. 2-3.

*an absolute level of the real is the same order as the impossibility of staging illusion. Illusion is no longer possible because the real is no longer possible".*<sup>27</sup>

When focusing on moving image media as part of reality it is also vital to consider *filmic* reality – that is, how the moving image can shape and inform the reality we live in. Richard Rushton's *The Reality of Film*<sup>28</sup> contextualises this idea by bringing together different theoretical proposals of filmic reality from André Bazin, Christian Mertz, Stanley Cavell, Gilles Deleuze, Slavoj Žižek and Jaques Rancière. Rushton concludes that films should not be considered as illusions or representations of reality; they should not be disconnected from the 'real world' but rather considered as part of reality. He writes: "*my desire has been to foreground films and our experiences of them and ways of understanding them as part of reality. Not as divorced from reality, but as composed of the kind of stuff that reality is real for us: thoughts, feelings, dreams, emotions, point-of-view.*"<sup>29</sup> In other words, Rushton considers film not as an abstracted entity or removed from reality, but as an equal entity – equal to all other things that exist in our day-to-day life.

### **1.2.3 The everyday**

*Rules of Engagement* is concerned with contemporary day-to-day lived experience, uncovering the drama that lies beneath everyday interaction. 'The Everyday' is a tricky concept and can be used in many different contexts.<sup>30</sup> My interest is in the everyday sits within mundane and insignificant moments, unspoken rules of interaction and notions

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p19.

<sup>28</sup> Richard Rushton, *The Reality of Film: Theories of Filmic Reality* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p.196.

<sup>30</sup> There is no shortage of academic works around the Everyday, it was foundational to a number of theorist such as Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau; Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life* centre on the impact of capitalism and industrialisation on human existence and perception and claims that the concept of everyday life only emerged in the modern era. Meanwhile de Certeau argued in *The Practice of Everyday Life* that people individualise mass culture in their daily life and ultimately that this can become a site of resistance. More recently Ben Highmore explored theories and practices in *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory* concerned with the everyday through close readings of primary material including both Lefebvre and de Certeau. Highmore argues that the concept of the everyday is not a new discourse and suggests it is a form of counter-tradition within cultural and social thought. Highmore does not focus on the routine and mundanity associated with quotidian life but about the moment the everyday is disrupted or becomes conspicuous, through 'the shock of the new' making the familiar strange.

of identity. I am interested in how the everyday is transformed when presented on screen and in turn when moving images (depicting the 'real' and 'everyday') permeate back into real quotidian existence. I am interested in taking everyday environments and stylising them to a point between the familiar and the strange. In previous projects, I have transformed a hospital into an emotional pressure cooker in the short film *In Waiting*<sup>31</sup>, a shopping centre into a sight of terror in the aforementioned *SYSTEM*<sup>32</sup> and the domestic space into a spotless show home in *How to Choose*<sup>33</sup> - a film that explored a decision making process, around which everyday objects to choose, delivered to camera as an instructional video. With *Rules of Engagement* I sought to continue this approach, turning real everyday settings into hybrid semi-fictional spaces.

#### **1.2.4 Storytelling, recollection and identity**

Mark Freeman writes about how we construct the self by re-interpreting past experiences<sup>34</sup> and in interpreting our past we consider our own description of the past not the actual experience<sup>35</sup>. He writes: *"if indeed the process of rewriting the self cannot help but culminate in fictions, in selective and imaginative literary constructions of who we have been and are, how are we to escape the conclusion that we ourselves are ultimately fictions?"*<sup>36</sup>

Another perspective, with the focus on the photographic image, is proposed by Celia Lury who asks how *"the photographic image may have contributed to novel configurations of personhood, self-knowledge and truth"*.<sup>37</sup> Lury elaborates on this and how seeing 'photographically' has transformed our understanding of ourselves, and although she focuses on the still image, a large part of her thesis can be applied to the moving image. For example, she writes about 'false memory syndrome' - how mediated representations contribute to a false biography.<sup>38</sup> Lury's work investigates notions of identity against a media-saturated backdrop, a central concern of my research.

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<sup>31</sup> *In Waiting*, Cecilia Stenbom, single channel film, 2014.

<sup>32</sup> *SYSTEM*, Cecilia Stenbom, single channel film, 2014.

<sup>33</sup> *How To Choose*, Cecilia Stenbom, single channel film, 2012.

<sup>34</sup> Mark Freeman, *Rewriting the self* (London: Routledge, 1993). p. 5.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p.7.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p.8.

<sup>37</sup> Celia Lury, *Prosthetic culture – photography, memory and identity*, New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 2.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 105-155.

Both Freeman and Lury present ideas about how experiences are re-interpreted as fictions, either through our descriptions of the past or through the (photographic) images that exist.

### **1.2.5 Making the familiar strange**

Bertolt Brecht's idea of the *verfremdungseffekt* - influential not only to stage drama but also to a wide range of contemporary filmmakers - envisaged objective judgement over emotional engagement, seeking a set of strategies for detaching an audience enough to engage with the work at a critical distance, thereby better equipping them to achieve a level of objective judgement. These strategies included stylised aesthetics and exaggerated performances.<sup>39</sup> 'Making the familiar strange' is a key component in my work; I take ordinary real life stories and translate them into what are ostensibly conventional narrative fictions, whilst at the same time heightening both the scenarios depicted as well as the narrative constructs adopted.

In the same way that the *verfremdungseffekt* is 'making strange' to achieve critical distance, defamiliarisation is the idea of studying or treating the ordinary as something strange in order to intensify our understanding of the familiar.<sup>40</sup> Looking at defamiliarisation and cinema from a cognitivist perspective, Laurent Jullier asks if the whole cinematographic process itself is defamiliarising, by either showing a world we cannot perceive due to limitations of our senses, or in a way that is different from how we usually see it?<sup>41</sup> Jullier lists examples of defamiliarising effects in cinema; for instance, the subversion of enaction routines, intentional or accidental, through awkwardness in performances or delayed or deliberately staged movements.<sup>42</sup> This technique, proposed by Jullier, is recurrently used in my work to draw attention to the artifice of moving image narrative.

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<sup>39</sup> Jan Udhe, 'The Influence of Bertolt Brecht's Theory of Distancing On The Contemporary Cinema, Particularly on Jean-Luc Godard' in *Journal of The University Film Association* (Vol.26, No 3 (1974), pp. 28.

<sup>40</sup> Victor Shklovsky first presented the idea of defamiliarisation in his essay *Art as Technique*. Victor Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique' in Newton K.M. (eds) *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory* (London: Palgrave), pp. 3-5.

<sup>41</sup> Laurent Jullier, 'Should I See What I Believe?' in Annie van den Oever (ed.) *Ostrannenie – On "Strangeness" and the Moving Image The History, Reception, and Relevance of a Concept* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), p.124.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., pp.129-130.

Within sociology, defamiliarisation can be a tool for study. Zygmunt Bauman suggested “familiarity may be in tension with inquisitiveness and this can also inform the impetus to innovate and transform [...] By examining that which is taken-for-granted, it has the potential to disturb the comfortable certitudes of life by asking questions no one can remember asking and those with vested interests resent even being asked. These questions render the evident puzzle and may defamiliarise the familiar.”<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, Bauman connects rules that govern social interaction with media saturation; he writes “we have increasingly moved towards a situation in which we gain, via the mass media, increasing amounts of knowledge through prescription rather than acquaintance with others.”<sup>44</sup> Although Bauman doesn’t specifically focus on cinema in his writings, his ideas of a liquid modernity – the constant change of relationships and identities in contemporary society and, for example, *consumer culture* or the *pursuit of happiness*, provide a helpful backdrop for exploring notions of identity and group behaviour, in order to uncover links between the stories that make up our identity and our experience of reality.<sup>45</sup>

### **1.2.6 Liminality in screen-based practices**

As the work operates somewhere between fine art and filmmaking, it cannot easily be shoehorned into set categories (e.g. artist’s moving image or narrative drama). A positioning occurs throughout each step of the process; exploring the screen-based practices the work is partly in dialogue with.<sup>46</sup>

The original aim of the research was to explore the positioning of the practice with a focus on this liminality. This is done at each stage of the film’s development rather than as a categorisation based solely on the final work – the traditional approach. In so doing, this account, reflection and contextualisation will demonstrate how the film and the process by which it was made, blur and complicate boundaries. This informs the film’s response to the core research question: how can filmmaking be deployed to complicate the fluctuating border between daily life and screen-based representations thereof?

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<sup>43</sup> Zygmunt Bauman & Tim May, *Sociological Thinking*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers 2001), p.10.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p.26.

<sup>45</sup> See Zygmunt Bauman, *Consuming Life*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007) or Zygmunt Bauman, *The Art of Life* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008).

<sup>46</sup> ‘Screen-based’ practices being used here to as a term to both capture and reflect the broad range of moving image forms everything from gallery based installation to narrative film making.

This research and text implicitly explore both moving image artworks and narrative films, presented and distributed in either gallery and/or cinema contexts. The focus is specifically on works that deal with the construction of screen-based narrative and/or those that complicate the boundaries of real life and screen-based versions of it. This includes works that explore the entanglement of real and representations; works that investigate the influence of screen-based narratives on real experiences; and works that, in one way or another, interrogate moving image and storytelling.

For example, Eija-Liisa Ahtila's multiscreen narrative installations examine issues of identity and human interaction and how the everyday can act as a site of wonder.<sup>47</sup> Her characters and their environments are set in the real, yet the stories often wander into the fantastical. *Consolation Service*<sup>48</sup>, a work about the end of a marriage, moves between realistically-shot scenes in settings such as an apartment and counselling room to footage of an entire group of friends submerged beneath a glacier. Ahtila's work is carefully scripted and, although often spread over several screens, adheres to narrative fiction conventions by utilising dialogue and visual storytelling.

An early filmic triptych by Ahtila, *Me/We, Okay and Gray*<sup>49</sup> was initially shown both as part of cinema advertising slots and re-contextualised for the gallery context. The triptych took the abbreviated and repetitive formats of advertising to form three 90-second films which all dealt with everyday anxieties.<sup>50</sup> *Me/We* starts as a commercial for laundry detergent but becomes a story about a man's sense of estrangement from his family. *OKAY* focuses on a violent and complicated relationship - the narrator's voice gradually changing from a man to a woman's, while *Gray* is set in an industrial elevator where three women are trapped during a nuclear meltdown.<sup>51</sup> Both *Consolation Service* and *Me/We, Okay and Gray* use both straight-to-camera narration and voice-over, which

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<sup>47</sup> Cathleen Chaffee, *Eija-Liisa Ahtila: Ecologies of Drama* (Buffalo: Albright – Knox Gallery, 2015), p. 10.

<sup>48</sup> *Consolation Service*, Eija-Liisa Ahtila, two-channel film, 1999.

<sup>49</sup> *Me/We, Okay and Gray*, Eija-Liisa Ahtila, 3x90 second single-screen films, 1993.

<sup>50</sup> Eija-Liisa Ahtila in Daniel & Aitken, *Broken screen: 26 conversations with Doug Aitken; expanding the image breaking the narrative* (London: Distributed Art Publishers, Thames & Hudson, 2006), p. 21.

<sup>51</sup> Albert Alberro, 'The Gap Between Film and Installation Art' in Leighton & Esche (eds.) *Art and the Moving Image: A Critical Reader* (London: Tate Publishing in association with Afterall, 2008), pp. 424-425.

implies a connection to documentary or reality television and again, intentionally confuses the fictional and the factual. Ahtila's work engages with the minutiae of daily life and elevates it into a form of mediated high drama.

Pierre Huyghe's two-channel installation *The Third Memory*<sup>52</sup> unpicks the complex relationship between real life and cinematic representations thereof.<sup>53</sup> Huyghe takes a real event (a failed bank robbery that led to a hostage situation that was broadcast live on television), and the cinematic treatment of it (the film *Dog Day Afternoon*<sup>54</sup>) and re-constructs it in a stripped-down replica set of the actual bank, together with the real bank robber John Stanley Wojtowicz. *The Third Memory* consists of two screens, one showing Wojtowicz, whose memory of the actual event has been mixed up with the cinematic version of it, recollecting the bank robbery, and the second screen shows extracts of *Dog Day Afternoon*, juxtaposing the two versions of the same event. In this way, Huyghe creates a kind of 'Rashomon effect' whereby cinematic narrative plays a part in our recollections of real events; the real replaced with a representation of the real.

### 1.3 Ethical Implications

The research, development, production and dissemination of *Rules of Engagement* include several participatory elements including the recorded conversations and working with actors and other key collaborators. Consequently, there is a precarious balance to be sought between having the freedom to artistically explore the parameters of the research and the work without exploiting its participants. In this research, I carefully considered the ethical implications of the work throughout the process, approaching it with a 'context sensitive' approach, rather than 'informed consent'.<sup>55</sup> For

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<sup>52</sup> *The Third Memory*, Pierre Huyghe, two-channel installation, 1999.

<sup>53</sup> It is perhaps not a coincidence that Jean-Charles Massera's exhibition catalogue text, *The Lesson of Stains* is a palimpsest of *The Society of The Spectacle*.

Pierre Huyghe & Jean-Charles Masséra, *The third memory: The Lessons of Stains*. (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou Service Commercial, 2000).

<sup>54</sup> *Dog Day Afternoon*, Dir. Lumet, Sidney, Warner Home Video Ltd, 1975.

<sup>55</sup> By informed consent I refer to the established documentary film practice of informing all participants of the project beforehand and asking them to sign a release form. In a context sensitive approach, the filmmaker adapts their ethical approach to the context, in order to build up the interpersonal relationship between filmmaker and participant. These ethical issues are explored further in Kate Nash's research into the participant's experience and consent, power and trust in 'Telling stories: the narrative study of



example, when I collected the real-life accounts, I did not want to 'steer' the conversations, which meant that the conversations could go in unexpected directions including potentially sensitive subject areas. This approach was discussed beforehand with the individuals when I initially asked for permission to record the conversations. Later on – when I had selected which recordings to work with – I went back to the participants to make sure I still had their permission to use the resulting conversations. Effectively I sought consent twice: firstly to do the recording; and secondly to use the stories that I had recorded. In addition, each participant had the option of viewing the final film before the public screenings.

Working with the principal cast required a different kind of consent: I wanted them to insert their own experiences into the scenarios rather than interpret a set or given character. I discussed this approach with actors before they agreed to take the roles. Six months after filming I approached the principal cast to do a voluntary recollection of the filming - this was not just an opportunity to record their experience of inhabiting the screen but also for the actors and me to reflect on the practices employed during the filming.

*Rules of Engagement* employed a mixed cast of professional and non-professional actors, and this required more preparation to ensure that everyone was aware of what was going to happen on set. There were also occasions, on set, when I started filming without calling out the action, in order to capture unscripted moments and exchanges between the cast. I had informed the entire cast of this method before the shooting commenced.

#### **1.4 Data Collection**

Audio recordings served as the primary method for data collection in connection with this research and this thesis. I adapted the conditions of the recordings for each participant and situation in order to maximise authentic data collection. As a general rule, I avoided obtrusive recording equipment, and the participants chose a place where they felt most comfortable to speak.

The in-conversation events following the screenings, it could be argued, were perhaps, done in a less comfortable environment as they took place in front of a live audience. However, I had purposely invited speakers whom I knew were used to public speaking. I had discussed the theme of the screenings with each speaker, and they also had an opportunity to view the works beforehand. Perhaps a weakness of the data collection at the screenings was that the audience was only invited to give oral feedback. I considered giving the audience feedback forms after the screenings, but decided against it, as I questioned how authentic and how considered feedback that was gathered immediately after the screenings would be.

There was a discussion during the editing process whether I should have conducted test screenings with audiences in order to gather targeted feedback regarding the cognitive and affective experience of the work; I was though unable to realise this idea due to budget constrictions.

### **1.5 Contribution to Practice**

The result and intention of this practice-led research, *Rules of Engagement*, and this accompanying and reflective text, isn't to offer a background overview of current or past moving image art practices and cinema against which my filmmaking may be placed. Countless anthologies and survey exhibitions have been produced on relationships between moving image art and cinema, many touching upon aspects of the research I have explored.<sup>56</sup>

However, certain elements, especially the practical processes of filmmaking and the relationships between art and mainstream narrative film, have been under-represented or not yet considered and this is the field to which my research seeks to contribute. Because of its position between art, film and academia, a borderline methodology

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<sup>56</sup> For example, *Art and the Moving Image: A Critical Reader* edited by Tanya Leighton and Charles Esche focuses on the mutual fascination between art and cinema; or *Expanded Cinema: Art, Performance, Film* edited by A.L Rees and Steven Ball, presents a history of expanded cinema ranging from experimental cinema to media art, looking specifically at practices that fuse film, multimedia and performance. The 1996 exhibition *Spellbound*, timed to coincide with the centenary of cinema, placed visual artists alongside filmmakers in the Hayward gallery and nearly a decade later *Time Zones*, at Tate Modern, proposed a reconsideration of the role and perception of time in relation to time based media.

(operating between fine art moving image and filmmaking) expands the parameters of moving image practices and places *Rules of Engagement* at a distinct juncture.

This written text aims to enrich the understanding of the relationship between screen-based fiction and quotidian reality, by tracking the transformation of an account into a narrative film - uncovering connections, sub-plots and meta-data surrounding the development, delivery and dissemination of the final film.

## **1.6 Structure of the Text**

To fully explore the question - *how can the process of filmmaking be deployed to complicate the fluctuating border between daily life and screen-based representations of it?*, the structure of the text mirrors the structure of the process of filmmaking itself. Charting and analysing the development, production and public screening of *Rules of Engagement*, this text reflects and is structured methodically around these junctions. Each chapter adopts a distinct form and style and incorporate transcripts, re-enactments and conversations that have driven the development and execution of the work. As such, the text engages with and hovers, to varying degrees, between the factual and fictional, the pragmatic and the ideal.

**Chapter 2: Source:** focuses on the collected verbal and written accounts that formed the basis of *Rules of Engagement*. The purpose of this chapter is to explore how captured accounts can be used to blur and complicate the perceived boundary between reality and fiction in narrative filmmaking, presenting both excerpts of the source material and initial treatment of these captured narratives. The chapter further contrasts and compares the artistic approaches of Omer Fast and Clio Barnard, both of whom used captured accounts as source material.

**Chapter 3: Conversation:** is based on a conversation that took place in July 2016 at the end of the first year of research and development. The purpose of this chapter is to outline the initial research, the critical underpinning, the key conceptual influences as well as linking the development process to the initially proposed, and later modified, research focus.

**Chapter 4: Blueprint:** seeks to explore the complex layers of references that formed *Rules of Engagement* by deconstructing the blueprint for the project and revealing its components (director's notes, character descriptions and instructions for cinematography and production design) - linking the use of appropriation and re-interpretation to the research questions.

**Chapter 5: Recollection:** re-lives the filming process in three separate conversations, based on the order in which the film was shot with the principal actors of *Rules of Engagement*. By collecting the actors' experience of 'live action' filming this chapter is a way of capturing and questioning the 'real' experience as captured on camera, and by doing so, expanding, exposing and blurring the boundary between what is real and what is represented on screen.

**Chapter 6: Notes:** examines the editing process via a fictional conversation in the editing suite based on actual verbal and written notes received from peers, colleagues and supervisors during the editing process. This chapter seeks to explore and question how editing can contribute to (as well as further complicate) the fluctuating border between everyday experience and its screen-based representations.

**Chapter 7: Questions & Answers:** the penultimate chapter focuses on the public dissemination of *Rules of Engagement*. It is developed from five separate Q&A events in connection with public screenings of the work. The purpose of this chapter is to consider the finished film both self-reflexively, by capturing initial thoughts and responses after screening the work and to consider whether the work ultimately functioned in terms of the questions it set out to explore.

**Chapter 8: Conclusion:** A summary and critical reflection of the project as a whole, the core ideas, approaches and findings of each chapter in this research. The conclusion also looks forward to new research that *Rules of Engagement* paved the way for.

It is important to note that *Rules of Engagement* - the film - is the only visual element of this thesis. The documentation of making *Rules of Engagement* is embedded within this text rather than in 'stills' or other visuals.

## Chapter 2: Source

This chapter presents excerpts of three recorded and transcribed verbal accounts that formed the basis for *Rules of Engagement*. By revealing the source material as well as comparing methods used by other practitioners who use real-life testimony, this chapter seeks to explore how captured accounts, used as part of filmmaking, can blur and complicate the boundary between the real and the fictional - a space that is continually inhabited and re-inhabited within the fundamentals of my practice.

To date, I have employed a number of approaches from recorded statements and interviews, to informal conversations. For example, in *The Case*<sup>57</sup> I turned transcribed excerpts from discussion events themed around perceptions of crime, into dialogue in a crime drama. In *SYSTEM*<sup>58</sup> I interviewed members of the public about anxieties and hang-ups in retail environments and re-interpreted the material collected as a fictional short film. In *REMAKE*<sup>59</sup> I collected written descriptions from people of fictional film interiors that I then re-created as actual scale models.

*Rules of Engagement* started with the idea of exploring social protocols in everyday contexts from the perspective of the individual who fails to conform, either through choice or by misunderstanding. I wanted to work with real experiences of failed or uncomfortable social interactions, but unlike previous projects where I had collected accounts through more formulaic methods, I decided that this topic needed an organic approach, teasing these themes out of two-way conversations with people within my own network rather from an unknown mass.

To tie the thematic of the film with the exploration into the relationship between screen-based narratives and everyday life, I deliberately looked to locate screen-based narrative content (film and television) within the accounts: firstly, in the use of fictional content as reference when describing something or someone; secondly, screen-based content as part of the testimony itself (the act of watching or discussing content).

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<sup>57</sup> *The Case*, Cecilia Stenbom, single channel film, 2013.

<sup>58</sup> *SYSTEM*, Cecilia Stenbom, single channel film, 2014.

<sup>59</sup> *REMAKE*, Cecilia Stenbom, single channel film, 2016.

I approached friends, colleagues and peers within my social networks with which I had previously shared conversations about the experiences of social protocols. I invited them to undertake informal but recorded conversations. As discussed in the introduction regarding the ethical stance and problems involved in this research, before the recordings I explained the premise and methods of the project, and ensured that I had their permission to record and that they were happy to go ahead. The names of the three participants who shared their stories have all been changed at the request of one individual. The recordings were transcribed in their entirety. A deliberate editing and 'clean up' of the transcripts below has taken place.<sup>60</sup>

## **2.1 Conversation 1: JACK**

The conversation with Jack took place in my former studio on October 30<sup>th</sup> 2015. Jack is a painter and operates in the fringes of the local art community: a deliberate outsider. Initially, I was interested in his engagement with the art scene and how he navigates social codes during exhibitions previews and other social events. It was difficult to get Jack to open up and the conversation was not going anywhere until we switched topic and started talking about Jack's family; this moved the conversation in a more interesting direction:

Cecilia: So what about family then, family holidays and get-togethers? What are you like when you go into 'family mode'?<sup>61</sup> Do you change something about your behaviour?

Jack: ...umm... Yeah, I don't swear... Unless I've had a drink... I kind of have to talk about stuff I don't want to talk about.

Cecilia: What kind of stuff?

Jack: Well I like football but I am only bothered by Newcastle [United]. My sister's husband knows all about it, he has the apps and stuff, he knows every match that is going on and he likes to talk about it, who scored and what the odds are, and I really couldn't give a shit. But I fake an interest in that. And my other sister's husband likes golf; he knows everything about it.

Cecilia: Do you also pretend to know about golf?

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<sup>60</sup> In general, hesitations, repetitions and speech-fillers have been removed.

<sup>61</sup> Previously in our conversation we had discussed social protocols of exhibition previews and the kind of 'mode' entered into during these events.

Jack: No, I couldn't even fake that. Sometimes we all have to find a TV show we've all watched, to keep the conversation going.<sup>62</sup>

Cecilia: By finding something in common?

Jack: Yeah.

Cecilia: What TV shows are you talking about?

Jack: Shows like *Game of Thrones*, but I haven't actually seen it.

Cecilia: So you fake that too?

Jack: No, I don't really know it but I get the gist of it. But then there's *The Walking Dead* everyone seen that.

[...]

Cecilia: How often does your family get together, with all your siblings and partners?

Jack: I don't know. It was my Dad's birthday last week so we went to my sister's house.

Cecilia: What was it, a dinner?

Jack: More like a buffet thing.

Cecilia: What time did you arrive?

Jack: 11 [am], quarter past I think.

Cecilia: What's your family like?

Jack: Quite laid back.

Cecilia: In what way?

Jack: When someone arrives it's not like everyone gets up or anything.

Cecilia: Did you eat at a specific time, or did you all just graze?

Jack: There was a moment where nobody would touch the food. And then Sarah, my stepsister, whose house it was, was just like "*help yourselves*", and then everyone went for the food.<sup>63</sup>

Cecilia: What was in the buffet?

Jack: Just the classic things... selection of pizzas, tiny sausage rolls, chicken drumsticks, there was hot dogs, chilli and a pie with rice and stuff.... Easy food.

Cecilia: And where did you sit?

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<sup>62</sup> This is the key statement I took out of Jack's account; this group of siblings found more in common within narrative fiction such as *Game of Thrones* a fantasy drama or *The Walking Dead* a zombie horror series than in their actual lives. *Game of Thrones*, (2011-present) Produced HBO. *The Walking Dead*, (2010-present) Produced for AMC.

<sup>63</sup> This was a perfect example of an unwritten protocol in relation to dining: the etiquette of waiting to be told to 'help yourself'.

Jack: On the only chair that was free when I got there.

Cecilia: And how long did this celebration last?

Jack: Until about 4 [pm].

Cecilia: That was the end?

Jack: Yeah, and by that point, some people, were not drunk, but you know a bit like tired drunk... Like not drunk but you just get really tired... I actually only drank one can.

Cecilia: Beer?

Jack: Yeah and a bit of another, but I just threw the rest down the sink cause I was really knackered. I had worked the day before.

I then asked why the birthday celebrations were held at Jack's stepsister's house and not his parents.

Jack: I think because we always do stuff in my mother's house.

Cecilia: So it was just a one off?

Jack: Yeah... And I think my stepsister likes doing that kind of thing.

Cecilia: Yeah?

Jack: She's got this relatively new house and I think she wants to show it off a little bit. And she likes to buy food from 'Marks and Spencer'.<sup>64</sup>

Cecilia: Is she well off compared with your other siblings?

Jack nods.

Cecilia: Does money cause any tension?

Jack: Think we are pretty relaxed about it. The only time it does is when, say if I haven't got the money at the time to chip in for birthday presents, but then someone will cover it. It's normally me that's like *"Oh I don't have it can I give it to you in a fortnight?"*

Cecilia: And do you?

Jack: Yeah!

Cecilia: And so how did you end it, when did you leave your Dad's party?

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<sup>64</sup> This was important for the dynamic amongst the siblings; the wealthier sister showing off the means to purchase premade party food from upmarket food chain.



Jack: My Auntie and Uncle left... And then... my brother had to go to meet someone, and he was going to get the metro and I thought I might as well go with him because he knew the way to the metro and I didn't.

Cecilia: Where was it?

Jack: The metro is Four Lanes End but I don't know the area very well.

Cecilia: So, that was your ticket to go? And who was left after you had gone?

Jack: My sister and her partner, my sister whose house it was, and my Mum and Dad.

Cecilia: And did they stay much longer?

Jack: I don't think so; my parents had already called a taxi.

Cecilia: What do you think they talk about when you leave the room?

Jack: About me?

We finished the conversation shortly after, as we were sitting in an unheated studio it had become too cold to sit there comfortably.

Later on, over *Messenger*:

Cecilia: When you had your Dad's get together, did you have a cake? And if you did what kind of cake was it? Did you sing to him?

Jack: Two cakes, one was gluten-free. Both homemade chocolate, the gluten-free one had some nuts in. We sang happy birthday and the two kids blew out the candles and the kids wanted to do it again so it happened three times.

Cecilia: Great stuff, thanks.

## **2.2 Conversation 2: ROBIN**

I met with Robin at the Laing Art Gallery Café at midday on November 5<sup>th</sup> 2015. I know Robin through my social network. We had previously discussed the idea of not fitting in to set social expectations. Robin had mentioned her experiences with the BDSM community and I was interested in the idea of an alternative group that practised its own set of social protocols.<sup>65</sup> Robin was assigned male gender at birth but identifies herself as a woman.

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<sup>65</sup> "BDSM is [...] is an amalgamation of three acronyms: B&D (bondage and discipline), D/s (domination/submission), and SM (sadomasochism)." Margot Weiss, *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), p. viii.

Robin: It struck me that if I'd recorded the sound but you couldn't see the people and what they were wearing and all that kind of thing you would think it was just a normal bar, generic music was playing, people were just talking about all kinds of normal things, like their house or... It was kind of mundane.<sup>66</sup>

Cecilia: Can you describe it to me?

Robin: It was a fairly small [BDSM] club night. There was one guy walking around in a gimp mask and just a thong, other people in head-to-toe cat-suits and just various kind of fetish paraphernalia, taking pictures of each other and catching up and having a drink and it wasn't that many people who were engaging in anything fetish, it was just like a social evening.

Cecilia: And this was your first time?

Robin: Yeah.

Cecilia: So why did you decide to go?

Robin: I was curious; I wanted to see what was going on. I think it's one of those things like a wedding or a funeral, everyone has a sort of idea of what it is but they are probably widely different from one to another, you know.

Cecilia: What was your idea of what it would be before you went? What did you imagine?

Robin: I suppose it was mostly from film iconography.<sup>67</sup> You occasionally see scenes in films where all kind of dark and sadistic things happens. I didn't expect the relaxed atmosphere and the sort of chit-chat like in any other bar or club. I thought it was going to be like a secret society and all this kind of ritualistic stuff. [...]

Cecilia: What did you wear?

Robin: I was just in my T-shirt and jeans.

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<sup>66</sup> The way Robin described the event as 'mundane' was an important factor in my decision to include her story in the project.

<sup>67</sup> Robin later elaborated that the films themselves did not directly depict the BDSM environment but allude to the kind of iconography that this scene is associated with, for example:

*The Doors*, Dir. Oliver Stone, Tri-Star Pictures, 1991.

*The Matrix*, Dir. Laurence & Lilly Wachowski, Warner Brothers, 1999.

*Secretary*, Dir. Stephen Shainberg, Santa Monica: Lionsgate Films, 2002.

*The Cell*, Dir. Tarsem Singh, Entertainment in Video Ltd, 2000.

*Wild At Heart*, Dir. David Lynch, The Samuel Goldwin Company, 1990.

*Videodrome*, Dir. David Cronenberg, Universal Pictures, 1983.

Cecilia: Did you stand out because you were dressed in 'normal' clothes?

Robin: Yeah, I guess.

Cecilia: Did you feel, in any way, different?

Robin: I always feel different.

[...]

Cecilia: What did people do [at the fetish club]?

Robin: It was a bar area, tables and chairs and people were kind of sitting around.

There was this kind of box that people got put in, you know?

Cecilia: Yes.

Robin: And a rack, that's all I can remember, I did think there would be more stuff.

Cecilia: Can you describe the venue?

Robin: Wooden floor, with the little round tables and stools, quite small.

Cecilia: Was the space done up for the event?

Robin: Yes, it was a function room they had hired, they bring their own bits and pieces in, but everything else was totally normal.

Cecilia: A normal bar kitted out with fetish paraphernalia?

Robin: Yes.

Cecilia: And how did you feel about it? Were you disappointed?

Robin: I was a bit disappointed because it was just kind of like... normal. I'd only ever just seen sensationalist images from films and stuff. So, yeah I was a bit disappointed, but then at the same time a little bit relieved. If I had walked into what I had imagined it to be, I don't know how I would have reacted or handled it. I didn't know I was looking for.

Cecilia: How did you interact with the other people in there? How was it different from a 'normal' night out?

Robin: The thing that really surprised me was that I just went in there and despite all pre-conceptions I just started chatting to people.

Robin continued to talk about experiences of the fetish scene. I was keen to find out how newcomers learnt about the rules and limitations of their interactions.

Cecilia: I am interested in the idea of a group that is quite tolerant and open, whilst still retaining all these rituals. The idea that they are being very tolerant to

someone who doesn't necessarily engage with it fully or doesn't know how to engage is quite interesting.<sup>68</sup>

Robin: They are a quite an interlinked group. There are a lot of unwritten rules of behaviour and stuff.

Cecilia: And how aware of those were you?

Robin: My flatmate had told me about one or two things like: *"You might see people leading other people around on a chain and collar and don't speak to the person in the collar, because they don't have permission to speak until the person leading them around gives them permission."* That's one of their things. And sometimes people do speak to them because they don't know the rules so they get corrected.

Cecilia: Does that cause upset?

Robin: No.

Robin told me about a break from the scene and how it took several years before he re-joined the scene. During this period Robin had gone from identifying as male to female. I asked Robin about how it was to come back to the scene.

Robin: New people come into the scene on a fairly regular basis and they have something called a 'Munch'. It is a kind of coffee get-together on a regular basis for people interested in BDSM. It's during the day and no one is wearing any kind of fetish gear. People who are curious can come along to that and chat with other people and start talking about what they are into and stuff like that.

Cecilia: Did you go to a 'Munch'?

Robin: Yes.

Cecilia: Can you describe it? How did you find out about it?

Robin: I joined a website called *FetLife*, like Facebook but for fetish people. And I found out about the local 'Munch' and I went along.

Cecilia: What sort of time and place was that?

Robin: It was like two in the afternoon, on a Sunday, in a normal bar.

Cecilia: Did you go on your own?

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<sup>68</sup> To me this was for me the most alien concept in Robin's anecdote; the juxtaposition of rules and the relaxed attitude towards people unfamiliar with those rules.

Robin: Yes, I had let the group know that I was going to turn up and I was told to turn up at a specific time. So I went there and said: *"Hi I am the person you chatted to on the website"* and they were like: *"Hello, come in"* and I got introduced to everyone and you kind of walk around chatting to people.

Cecilia: So it's not like a sit-down?

Robin: No, it's not like an interview or anything, it's really quite informal. People ask you what you are into.

Cecilia: So, you walked into this event, and you found the person you had been in touch with online, and how did you find that person? Did you know how he or she looked like?

Robin: I had no idea of what she looked like but she was really vibrant, she was the hostess of the event.

Cecilia: So you just naturally gravitated towards her?

Robin: I briefly chatted to her and then she was off talking to other people.

Cecilia: And then what did you do, did you have a drink or...?

Robin: I bought a drink and then I sat down with some other people.

Cecilia: What did you have to drink?

Robin: I just bought a Coke, because I was going to this work meeting afterwards.

Robin described later how she sat down at a table.

Cecilia: What did you chat about? Can you remember?

Robin: It was quite generic stuff like: *"Have you been to a Munch before?" "Have you ever been to a fetish thing."* People were talking about what they were into.

Cecilia: Did you know who else was new [at the Munch]?

Robin: No, I didn't know.

Cecilia: How long did the meeting last?

Robin: A couple of hours.

Cecilia: How are you when you go into a social situation where you don't know anyone, were you nervous about going in?

Robin: A bit.

[...]

Cecilia: And this event, was in a normal bar, so there were there people in there who weren't a part of this Munch?

Robin: They had a little cordoned off area, with a note saying 'Private Party'; one of those TENSA barrier things.

Cecilia: There were no eavesdroppers?

Robin: No, it was fine. Because it was really low key it was just people chatting and joking. I don't think you would get a sense if you were in that bar, and you looked over at this group, you wouldn't be thinking like: "*They're a bunch of kinky fuckers.*"<sup>69</sup>

[...]

Cecilia: And this fairly civilised 'Munch', did you then later meet the same people on the club nights?

Robin: Yeah, yeah. I was chatting to someone, and she was very much into subservience, and various things like being tied up and what not and she would go to a particular club.

Cecilia: And you would have a conversation about that?

Robin: Yeah, and she would go to this club, and they have various apparatuses there that she liked and I went to that particular one once.

Cecilia: So, for you, the 'Munch' was a fact-finding mission?

Robin: Part of it is people talking about what events are on.

Cecilia: The conversations that went on at the 'Munch', were they fairly direct?

Explicit? Was it about finding out who was into what?

Robin: Yes, and also to kind of gauge the people. Who might turn out to be an arsehole? You know, because there are some people like that, in any group.

The conversation finished shortly afterwards, Robin had to go to another meeting.

### **2.3 Conversation 3: NADIA**

My conversation with Nadia took place at Settle Down Café on November 16<sup>th</sup> 2015. The café had just opened and we were the first costumers to arrive, we settled in the back room of the café. I know Nadia through friends of friends. She used to work as a pharmacist but changed her professional career and now works with film. Initially, I had thought that her move from pharmaceuticals to experimental filmmaking was going to be the focus of her story, but as we started the conversation, we picked up on the first

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<sup>69</sup> This created tension between the members of the 'Munch' and the general crowd in the bar; this was later used in the film.

ever conversation we had had; about her 6-month work placement at the Rikshospital in Copenhagen.

Cecilia: We spoke earlier about 'The Law of Jante'<sup>70</sup> and how you experienced it when you went to Denmark?

Nadia: Yes, there's 'The Law of Jante' and then there is 'Lagom'.<sup>71</sup>

Cecilia: Can you think about a specific experience? You came to Copenhagen when you were fairly young?

Nadia: Yes, I was 23. It was while I was doing my pharmacy degree, I was working in their chemotherapy unit doing research. I had left everything back home in Belfast to parachute myself into a place where I didn't know anybody, working with people who were professional, and for the most part at least ten years older than me. And at that point, I looked like a little punk I had a lip piercing and spiky black hair.<sup>72</sup>

Cecilia: What were they like?

Nadia: The people at the department were all really nice, but there was a level of detachment. I remember asking: "*Do you want to go for a drink or a coffee or something*" because I was so bloody lonely, I was going home alone to my apartment every night, and they would say: "*Yes, I think that we could do it perhaps next week*" and I was just thinking: "*Oh God*"!

Further on Nadia starts talking about celebrations in the workplace, and the use of the national flag as a decoration at birthdays.

Nadia: I've always associated flags with being a bad thing, but they were everywhere.

Cecilia: The national flag?

Nadia: Yes, I remember that as being very weird because I associate that with territory and suddenly it was here in quite an innocent way, at birthday celebrations.

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<sup>70</sup> 'The Law of Jante' (Janteloven) a term used across the Nordic region and describes a scornful attitude toward anyone who excels.

<sup>71</sup> 'Lagom' is Swedish meaning just the right amount.

<sup>72</sup> This gave me a visual look of the character and it was important to the story as it was her look that made her stand out against her work colleagues.

Cecilia: Did you have your birthday when you were there?

Nadia: No, but if someone in the department had their birthday, there would be like little flags around their desk when they got in. It really didn't compute with me.

Nadia continued to talk about the facility and her work there. I ask her about where the staff would go on their breaks.

Nadia: They had a canteen. I kept trying to encroach myself I couldn't really work it out; why I was having so much trouble fitting in. Because they were lovely people... One thing I remember vividly when I came to the end of my six months and I was about to leave there was this winter party, organised by the department, there was a dinner, and people were relaxing a little bit and they said to me: *"we were so incredibly surprised at how nice you turned out because when you turned up and you looked like that and you had that piercing we were just really shocked and we would just naturally assume that you weren't very nice."* That was probably why they didn't speak to me. I was really appalled by this and I remember after this asking the boss: *"Is that true?"* And he was like: *"I've never known someone who had a piercing on their face."* They are just ultra-conservative. That something as basic as how you look could affect how people thought about you.

Cecilia: Can you describe your first day?

Nadia: I came in the morning. I just remembered feeling a little ball of tears in my stomach, I was really just: *"Oh my god, this is where I am!"*

Cecilia: Did you find the hospital environment different from anything you've experienced in Belfast?

Nadia: It's a different kind of setup, it's more sanitary quite clinical, even in the scrubs people looked different. People were wearing protective clothing all of the time. And they all looked like they were just about to go into theatre to go in and do surgery.

Cecilia: So, you arrived and what happened then?

Nadia: I remember making my way to the department, on my own, and everyone I met spoke perfect English. I got taken to meet the boss and the people who were going to be in the office and I remembered it all being so polite and reserved. And



just thinking: *"Is someone going to crack a joke?"* But there was nothing unpleasant about it. It was just like: *"Wow, I'm not in Belfast, things are really different here."*

Nadia covers the details of the security system of the facility and then I asked about the induction process.

Cecilia: So, when did you get inducted to the... What did you say they were called, zones?

Nadia: Yes zones. It would be known as an aseptic production facility, and different places that make different things will have different requirements, so it's about contamination and the safety of the operator. You have to step over barriers, a low wall, and as you step over it that foot has to not touch anything on the outside. It's really strict; you get really paranoid because you don't want to forget any of the stages. I was terrified because it was really complicated. Which t-shirt do I put on now? You know. You really didn't want to mess it up.

Cecilia: Who showed you the steps?

Nadia: An older lady, who was very brusque. She'd be like: *"Not like that, like this. Take off your earrings and you've got to take that out of your face."*

I asked Nadia to describe the gowning process in more detail.

Nadia: You picked your tieback suit or whatever and as you stepped across you would put it on over your scrubs, and that would be you entering another zone of clean. It's really weird though it's a bit like in science fiction, a decompression chamber or something.<sup>73</sup>

Cecilia: And how long did the whole gowning process take?

Nadia: About an hour. Let's say you have to go through three or four zones every morning before you actually get to the bit where you are doing your work. You can't forget anything because if you do, you've got to go all the way back again.

Cecilia: You can't go to the toilet?

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<sup>73</sup> Nadia later clarified that she had referred to *The Andromeda Strain*, Dir. Robert Wise, London: Universal Pictures (UK), 1971; a film about team of scientists who investigate a deadly organism of extraterrestrial origin.

Nadia: No, if you want to go to the toilet it has to be planned. None of the clothing can be used again. It's not a job made for someone who has got OCD [Obsessive Compulsive Disorder]. I just remember feeling all this time that I was going to get it wrong.<sup>74</sup>

Cecilia: And inside the zones, is it just one person working per zone?

Nadia: No there would usually be more, they have these cabinets with a hood over it and gloves where you put your hands through, so there would be one person per cabinet. But it would just depend on how much chemotherapy had to be done that day.

Cecilia: And in that environment, do people talk to each other?

Nadia: You wouldn't talk when you were working, your concentration is really important.

Cecilia: So, I suppose your coffee break was a big thing? It was scheduled?

Nadia: Yeah.

Cecilia: And would that be chatty or quite quiet or...

Nadia: Yes, reasonably quiet. They would probably be talking about developments in the department and they were all so conscientious about their jobs and I couldn't fit. The bit where you talk about your boyfriend or what's on TV that just didn't happen.<sup>75</sup>

We continued our conversation about her experiences in Denmark until Nadia had to run to catch a train.

## **2.4 The Accounts**

Jack, Robin and Nadia's accounts had very little in common formally; Jack described a recent event, and Nadia's and Robin's events that took place further back in time. Jack described one event, Robin two separate occasions and Nadia spoke about a 6-month period of her life. Thematically all three stories dealt with the idea of liminality; they were all outsiders attempting to adjust to ill-fitting or uncomfortable social protocols. Jack having to fake an interest in things in order to fit in with his family; Robin finding

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<sup>74</sup> The high stake of the work environment that Nadia described also provided me with an element of comedy.

<sup>75</sup> In Jack's story, television content was the only thing that got a conversation started amongst the siblings, in Nadia's story it is the lack of television chat that is noticeable; she wanted to use television content to connect with her work-colleagues.

herself uncomfortable by the laid-back nature of a scene she had pre-conceived notions about, and Nadia trying to fit in with 'ultra-conservative' work colleagues.

Did the accounts stray from the actual experiences? Moreover, what might affect or influence the recollections to become more or less fictional? By analysing narrative life accounts, fictional, factual and autobiographical, Mark Freeman<sup>76</sup> suggests a number of discrepancies between accounts and actual experiences: new meanings are placed on the past in light of the present day, as well as past experiences determine how the present is experienced; living and telling are not the same activities, the experience of on-going moments is not the same as reflecting upon them; it is impossible to separate the facts of an event from the narrative treatment of these; social reality permeates life and stories-told, meaning that these narratives are socially constructed.<sup>77</sup> Freeman asks whether the words we use to describe the past are indeed our own or descriptions made by others of these experiences?<sup>78</sup> If our descriptions of events are influenced by descriptions made by others, could moving image content that deals with similar events also influence our recollections of experiences?

Within psychology, there has been a recent upsurge of narrative approaches to understanding human behaviour and how storytelling is integral to the human experience. Dan P. McAdams argues: *"that identity itself takes the form of a story, complete with setting, scenes, character, plot, and theme [...] Life stories are based on biographical facts, but they go considerable beyond the facts as people selectively appropriate aspects of their experience."*<sup>79</sup> McAdams also goes further to link the connection between existing narratives and the construction of self: *"From the media to everyday discourse, modern life is filled with models and examples of how to live a meaningful life [...] modern people are socialised to find their own way, to craft a self that is true to who one 'really' is. As a consequence, people pick and choose and plagiarise selectively from the many stories they find in culture to formulate a narrative identity."*<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Mark Freeman, *Rewriting the self* (London: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., pp. 224-227.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., pp. 50-80.

<sup>79</sup> Dan P. McAdams, 'The Psychology of Life Stories', *Review of General Psychology*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2001), pp. 101.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., pp. 115.

The three anecdotes described universal experiences (social exclusion and notions of belonging) and are all set in fairly mundane everyday settings (a middle-class home, a hospital/laboratory and a bar). Taking Freeman's idea around re-writing the self and McAdams links between identity and storytelling, one can assume that the biographical accounts of Jack, Robin and Nadia were to some degree selective and structured as narratives. It is not a part of this project to establish how far the accounts strayed from the actual experiences described, but it is critical to establish that the 'reality' I sought to re-interpret was in itself already semi-fictional. When I began to work with the accounts and started the process of turning the collected anecdotes into a moving image narrative, I then re-structured them as new narratives, incorporating completely made-up as well as existing narrative treatments of similar settings from film and television.

The accounts of the participant's real everyday experiences connected to screen-based fictions. Jack's account focused on the family unit; siblings that have grown apart and lost a sense of intimacy, poles apart in terms of interests and income brackets. To find a common denominator they resorted to discussing popular television fiction. When Robin entered the world of BDSM, a closed underground scene, she only had film iconography as a reference point. Nadia's first experience of working abroad took her into an environment utterly alien to her - *"a bit like in science fiction"*. Nadia's struggle to fit in amongst her colleagues was exacerbated by the lack of trivial 'chit-chat' amongst the work colleagues, including television content. In these collected stories, fictional content was either used to relate to the experience or to ease social interaction, meaning that moving image fictional narrative was already ingrained in the experiences I had collected.

## **2.5 Captured Accounts as Source**

Established approaches that use real experiences to create fiction include everything from biographical films to documentary re-enactment. However, how can the use of captured accounts, or found narratives, complicate the relationship between reality and screen reality? To give context and help develop the *mise-en-scène*, I have looked at the works of Omer Fast and Clio Barnard. Both operate between art and cinema and interrogate the blurred hinterland between reality and fiction in very different ways, but both do so via the utilisation of captured accounts.

Omer Fast's *The Casting*<sup>81</sup> and *5,000 Feet is the Best*<sup>82</sup> are both based on interviews. *The Casting* is presented as a four-channel installation on two screens projected front and back. The audience first encounters a set of tableaux-vivants, wherein the action has been frozen and hear a conversation that relates to the imagery. On the other side of the installation, the other two screens reveal the conversation between Omer Fast and a U.S. Army Sergeant. However the conversation, previously only heard, has been spliced together, and although it sounds continuous, it is heavily edited and manipulated. The Sergeant is an actor whose script is loosely based on interviews conducted with soldiers returning from the Iraq War.<sup>83</sup>

*5,000 Feet is the Best*, is a single-screen 30-minute long film about drone warfare, which oscillates continually between fact and fiction. Part of the film is an interview with a real US drone operator, another part is a dramatised re-enactment of the interview itself, and other parts veer into the entirely fictional. The film's different elements form a repetitious, contradictory and circular narrative that plays with the familiarity of screen constructs: interview, documentary re-construction and narrative drama.

Fast's work, often labelled as 'media critique', is concerned with narrative itself; in his own words: "*I accept that the media presents narratives – that is what it does – and in order to present a narrative you have to form it [...] the notion of manipulation is not very interesting, manipulation is part of what you do even when you talk, when you tell a story.*"<sup>84</sup> Fast draws attention to the editing that occurs at the stage of re-telling by playing with narrative continuity in his works. Fast does not lay claim to any documentary truth: "*Lived experiences are often extremely disappointing when you film it, so you have to bring in these dramatic crutches in order to make it communicate.*"<sup>85</sup>

Clio Barnard's work has moved from art to narrative cinema. The work is concerned with forms of representation and authenticity at the intersection of documentary and

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<sup>81</sup> *The Casting*, Omer Fast, 4 channel video installation, 2007.

<sup>82</sup> *5,000 Feet is the Best*, Omer Fast, single screen film, 2011.

<sup>83</sup> Erica Balsom, *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), pp. 150-151.

<sup>84</sup> Marcus Verhagen, 'Pleasure & Pain', *Art Monthly*, Issue 330 (2009), p. 2. Quote from interview with Omer Fast.

<sup>85</sup> Marcus Verhagen, 'Pleasure & Pain', *Art Monthly*, Issue 330 (2009), p. 4. Quote from interview with Omer Fast.

fiction, working with real life testimony, re-enactment and fiction. *Dark Glass*<sup>86</sup> is a single-take, 8-minute long oneiric film, shot on a mobile phone with a soundtrack that features a verbatim reconstruction of a hypnosis session with a woman recollecting childhood photographs. The images and the sound appear connected, but throughout the film there are discrepancies between what is said and what is seen. The visual narrative unfolds seemingly in reverse from the soundtrack and ends on the same image with which it started. *Dark Glass* is a reconstruction of a reconstruction; based on memories triggered by photographs, retrieved during hypnosis, re-enacted by actors and then visually re-imagined. An earlier work *Road Race*<sup>87</sup> explores an underground tradition of horse racing on roads within traveller communities. In this work, Barnard mixed documentary and restaged footage of an actual road race to the point where the edges of reality and fiction become seamless.

Barnard's first feature-length film *The Arbor*<sup>88</sup> is a project centred on the life of playwright Angela Dunbar. In this work, actors lip-synced to recorded interviews from family and friends, creating semi-faux interviews to camera. The interviews were intermixed with sections of Dunbar's stage plays re-enacted on the council estate where she lived. Barnard's film questions documentary's ability to tell a 'truth' by carefully reconstructing recorded testimony as a seemingly conventional 'talking head' documentary. She further complicates the boundary between fiction and documentary by recreating Dunbar's fictional plays within the setting where they were originally conceived. Her second feature film, *The Selfish Giant*<sup>89</sup> inspired by Oscar Wilde's story of the same name, is a seemingly straightforward narrative film and tells the fictional story of 'Arbor' and his friend 'Swiftly' - two teenage boys collecting and selling scrap metal on a Bradford estate. The main character was inspired by a 14-year old boy named 'Matty' whom Barnard encountered while filming *The Arbor*.<sup>90</sup> Barnard set out to tell a version of his story and, in order to research his story further, she interviewed his mother and

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<sup>86</sup> *Dark Glass*, Clio Barnard, single-channel video, commissioned by Film & Video Umbrella, 2006.

<sup>87</sup> *Road Race*, Clio Barnard, two screen installation, duration 39 minutes, 2004.

<sup>88</sup> *The Arbor*, Dir. Clio Barnard, Verve Pictures, 2010.

<sup>89</sup> *The Selfish Giant*, Dir. Clio Barnard, IFC Pictures, 2013.

<sup>90</sup> Barnard has mentioned how she met 'Matty' on the set of *The Arbor* in several interviews. For example in Kate Muir 'The Instability of Truth', *Sight & Sound*, 23(11) (2013), pp. 32–33 and Sean O'Hagan 'Clio Barnard: why I'm drawn to outsiders – interview', *The Observer* (13.10.2013).

spent significant time with 'Matty' including collecting scrap metal with him.<sup>91</sup> Where the real 'Matty' ends and the fictional 'Arbor' begin is unclear, but what I find interesting is that Barnard seamlessly mixes a real-life narrative and fiction with a Dickensian fairy tale to create a fictional film that shares formal concerns with British social realism - a genre that emphasises realism as social commentary.<sup>92</sup> But, according to Barnard herself, she sees her work as a critique of any genre that lays claim to authenticity, which includes Social Realism.<sup>93</sup> Barnard questions the desire to close the gap between what is real and represented while admitting that her relationship to the idea of truth is complicated; "*I am aiming at authenticity, but partly what my work is about is how slippery that truth or authenticity is*".<sup>94</sup>

## 2.6 Summary

*Rules of Engagement* shares concerns and approaches with the way both Omer Fast worked with real-life testimony in *The Casting* and *5000 feet is the Best*, and how Clio Barnard has worked with found narratives, to verbatim reconstruction, to fiction based on real people. It is also important to note the different type and scale of the works discussed. For example, *The Casting* and *5,000 Feet is the Best* are gallery-based installations, *The Selfish Giant* is a feature film, and *Rules of Engagement* is a short film.

Both Omer Fast's and Clio Barnard's work has been significant in the development of my own approach to working with found narratives. Fast highlights the fictionalising that occurs already at the point of re-telling by making the editing in *The Casting* visible. He further complicates the boundary in *5000 feet is the Best* by taking real-life testimony and mixing it with complete fiction in a seamless circular narrative. Fast collects stories that are mixed up with the completely made up, and as a storyteller, he utilises plot and appropriation as part of a temporal installation. Barnard's *The Selfish Giant* formally and

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<sup>91</sup> *Clio Barnard in Conversation*, interview with Jonathan Romney, 2014.

<http://www.bfi.org.uk/films-tv-people/532040d518d0f> [Accessed 06.10.2017]

<sup>92</sup> For example in Clive Nwonka's critical article on the work of Clio Barnard's *Selfish Giant* and Andrea Arnold's *Fish Tank* (2009) he considers them part of contemporary British social realism. Nwonka, Clive "You're what's wrong with me': *Fish Tank*, *The Selfish Giant* and the Language of contemporary British social realism'. *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film*, Volume 12, No. 3 (2014).

<sup>93</sup> *Clio Barnard Interview*, BFI and London Film Festival 2013

<http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/video/video-clio-barnard-selfish-giant> [Accessed 06.10.2017]

<sup>94</sup> Quote from interview with Clio Barnard. Kate Muir, 'The Instability of Truth', *Sight & Sound*, 23(11) (2013), pp. 32-33.

stylistically adheres to conventions of social realism; however the work is a veiled critique of the genre's ability to convey the truth. Barnard gently subverts the genre by abandoning the intent of realism and engaging with fictional storytelling, thereby creating a fairy tale disguised as Kitchen Sink Drama. Both of these artists deal with the blurred border between reality and fiction: they both utilise our familiarity with screen-based fiction in their treatment of reality as source material.

As the screenplay for *Rules of Engagement* developed, I started mixing the found narratives with the entirely made up, together with references from televisual and cinematic content that were mentioned in the original accounts. This organic process allowed *Rules of Engagement* to venture into an increasingly fictional space.

The next chapter *Conversation* is a semi-fictitious conversation about the research and development phase of *Rules of Engagement*; the chapter will further explore some of the formal decisions made in the development of the screenplay.



## Chapter 3: Conversation

The following script is a fictionalised conversation between me and two other filmmakers - one working broadly within the fine art area, and the other within observational documentary film - based on an actual studio visit that took place in June 2016.

The conversation represents a snapshot of a specific moment in the process of filmmaking: after a significant period of research and before the machinery of production has taken hold. It is a moment when everything and nothing is possible, everything because the page is blank and nothing because no real funds have been secured. This conversation took place in real-life; it was recorded and then transcribed. The transcript has been edited and parts have been fictionalised for purposes of this text.

The conversation is based around two documents that I had shared before the visit: a concept outline and an early draft of the screenplay for *Rules of Engagement*.

The purpose of this chapter is to capture the development process, linking the original ideas to the research question.

### 3.1 The Conversation

INT. STUDIO/OFFICE SPACE - MORNING

A desk cluttered with paperwork, written statements and proposals. Drawings and reference photos are pinned on the wall behind the desk. A freshly made pot of coffee and three cups are placed on a sideboard.

The door knocks, Cecilia opens the door; Keith and Peter are outside. Cecilia welcomes them into the studio.

CECILIA  
Coffee?

Keith and Peter shake their heads. They sit down as directed by Cecilia.

Cecilia gets a small recorder out of her desk drawer.

CECILIA

Do you mind if I record this?

KEITH

Of course not.

Peter nods in agreement. Cecilia starts the recording.

Cecilia picks up a stapled three-page document.

CECILIA

What I wanted to do today is to look at the proposal for the film. I sent you a concept outline, which is a proposal, a pitching document and a brief for my collaborators. For me, the document attempts to tie it all together. I also sent you the latest draft of the screenplay.

Cecilia pulls out a screenplay from the piles of papers on her table.

CECILIA

I've found that working with the screenplay format is the best way to organise and structure the work. It's a device to connect the text with the visual narrative.

Cecilia points at the wall.

CECILIA

And to further work on the visual ideas I've drawn key stills from films and artworks and these visual ideas then feed back into the script that I am developing and will inform the cinematography and production design.

Peter and Keith look at the images and drawings on the wall. Visual reference photos include film stills from *Exhibition*<sup>95</sup>, *The Imposter*<sup>96</sup>, *Songs from The Second Floor*<sup>97</sup>, *Syndromes of a Century*<sup>98</sup>, and *Involuntary*<sup>99</sup> as well as documentation from artworks including Stan Douglas' *The Secret Agent*<sup>100</sup> and Isaac Julien's *Playtime*<sup>101</sup>.

CECILIA

I am not looking to re-stage something that looks real or is a realistic representation; instead, I am looking to create a world that sits in between the seemingly real and the purely fictional but contain elements of both. What kind of interiors, objects and artefacts will offer the right level of ambiguity? Initially, I had hoped that I could build sets so I could have total control of the design of the film, but costs are prohibitive. Instead, I am looking into existing locations where I can create these quasi-fictional environments.

Cecilia pauses and looks down at her notes.

CECILIA

I've also started to think about who would embody the characters. Do I work with an actor or with a real person? Or do I mix it up even further by working with someone who only partly impersonates the character and allow him or her to insert his or her story into it? So, in effect, they would be playing a real version of themselves in a fictional story.

KEITH

For me it's really good to see the script and to read the statement and now to see it visually, it's coming together a lot for me.

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<sup>95</sup> *Exhibition*, Dir. Joanna Hogg, BBC films, 2013.

<sup>96</sup> *The Imposter*, Dir. Bart Layton, Film4, 2012.

<sup>97</sup> *Songs from The Second Floor* (Sånger från andra våningen), Dir. Roy Andersson, Triart Film AB, 2000.

<sup>98</sup> *Syndromes of a Century*, Dir. Apichatpong Weerasethakul, BFI Distribution, 2006.

<sup>99</sup> *Involuntary* (De ofrivilliga) Dir. Reuben Östlund, Svensk Filmindustri AB, 2008.

<sup>100</sup> *The Secret Agent*, Stan Douglas, six channel installation, 2015.

<sup>101</sup> *Playtime*, Isaac Julien, seven channel installation, 2014.

Keith looks at the wall contemplatively.

KEITH

The three characters are they the ones you are going to stick with? Is this essentially the bare bones of the film?

CECILIA

Yes.

KEITH

So we have three characters? You wouldn't add another character?

CECILIA

No, I might change the order, or muddle up the narratives. Nadia, Robin and Jack's stories complement each other; one set in a working environment, one in a public context and Jack's set in the domestic sphere.

PETER

Two stories form a dialogue, three a triangle and a more complicated conversation.

CECILIA

The three stories all deal with the idea of 'outsiderdom' in very different ways; Nadia wants to belong but doesn't know how to get accepted by her work colleagues, Robin has pre-conceived ideas about the social group he enters but misunderstands their social protocols totally, and Jack that has outgrown the protocols that he re-enters by visiting his family. Instead of talking about one kind of social protocol or one kind of outsider position I'm bringing more to the table and by that complicating the narrative.

KEITH

It feels like you have got something now, for me this is a really nice moment. Peter, you must have lots of feedback and comments, and I've got some stuff, but how should we do this?

PETER

Why don't you kick off with some of the comments you have and then I can come in with what I've got. Some of them might overlap.

KEITH

My first question I had was around your project outline and concepts of commodity culture. There is a kind of engagement with consumer culture; how it affects interactions particularly in public or mundane spaces and I am not sure how this is feeding into the screenplay.

Keith roots around his paper, and pulls out the outline document.

KEITH

Here it is:

(Keith reads from a piece of paper)

*"The language and mechanisms of consumer culture"* this is part of your overall artist statement, right?

(Continues reading)

*"how moving image can be redeployed to reveal critical insights into consumerist culture and the human response to consumer-driven environments."*

CECILIA

The problem with the proposal is the focus; this is not a project about commodity culture *per se*.<sup>102</sup> The key is looking at narrative moving image content, the televisual and cinematic – in the context of consumer-driven

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<sup>102</sup> At the time I had surveyed literature on commodity culture and, for example Walter Benjamin, now famous in *The Work of Art in The Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, provided a useful perspective on cinema as reproducible media by contemplating the cultural and societal impact, positive and negative, of the availability of reproduction technology. The text deals extensively with cinema (television was yet to invade the domestic sphere at the time it was written). Benjamin recognised the possibilities of cinema as a tool for highlighting and expanding our understanding of the world whilst being mindful of its inherent power to manipulate. He wrote: *"exploring commonplace environments under the inspired guidance of the lens, on one hand film increases our understanding of the inevitabilities that govern our lives while ensuring, on the other hand, that we have a vast, undreamt-of amount of room to manoeuvre!"* Walter Benjamin *The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction*. (London: Penguin Books, 2008), p. 29.

culture and everyday life. How, for example, it could be argued there is an overload of the moving image in daily life, or media saturation if you like, as a result of a consumer-driven culture.

Cecilia looks at the wall with images.

CECILIA

My research focuses on how screen-based content permeates real life and, in turn, how does real life form and inform screen-based narratives? Where can you find evidence in everyday life of media saturation? Does it affect human interaction or permeate notions of self?

Cecilia goes quiet for a few beats.

CECILIA

...and then I made a connection between the outline and the theme of the work; everyday rituals. This morning I found *RITUAL*, a bath product someone given me, on the packaging it said "*adding luxury to your everyday routines*" and I realised that there was a direct link: commodity culture creates consumer habits, which become part of everyday rituals. I am exploring popular moving image content, a product of a commodity-driven culture, and asking if it is possible to use the narrative conventions generated via this kind of content, as part of a moving image practice, to expose and critically examine these relationships?

KEITH

In your outline, you talk about 'invisible protocols' is that what you mean by rituals? They are not stated or written as such but they are there, and they will be repeated because they are essentially ritualised?

Cecilia nods

CECILIA

My question would be: Does the moving images that surround us, the narratives we consume, influence our construction of social reality and ultimately the social protocols we adhere to?

KEITH

The notion of reality construction has completely imploded for me. I can see that in the script and you are expressing that through the statement, which is why I found it really useful. So, this idea of exploring the transformation of lived experiences onto the screen?

CECILIA

It's an approach I've used in previous projects, taking actual accounts of experiences, stories or anecdotes and turning them into screen-based narratives. With this project I realised that in all of the accounts I gathered there were references to pre-existing screen-based content, as a way to describe their experiences, almost as if they were 'Televising' their own reality.<sup>103</sup>

Cecilia makes a circular gesture then pauses for a beat.

CECILIA

Going back to the notion of reality and how, even if you offer up a verbatim account of something, as soon as it's mediated it becomes removed from the real experience. I am interested in questioning whether the transformation from the real to the mediated could be highlighted in the film itself?

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<sup>103</sup> I have not come across the expression '*televising*' in any writing; I use it as a way of discussing the phenomena of referring to fictional content when describing real events or used as a common denominator in conversations.

KEITH

For me, the screen-based narratives effectively constitute the 'reality' in film: they inform and shape the lived experience. And that's why this excites me, there's something there, which is often not acknowledged and you are bringing that to the forefront.

Keith pauses for a beat, then looks down into his notes.

KEITH

Other things that were triggered by reading your script, the idea of taking real characters, who then play versions of themselves that is quite common, isn't it?

Cecilia nods.

KEITH

I am thinking of a recent example of *Looking for Eric*<sup>104</sup> the Cantona film by [Ken] Loach a very high profile example of Cantona playing a version of himself. A different starting point, but in terms of technique and method similar to what you talked about. Locally Amber films often take real characters that then play fictionalised versions of themselves.<sup>105</sup> So the question I had how do you position yourself vis-à-vis this kind of common, not mainstream, established approaches to fiction which has its roots in social realism?

CECILIA

It's interesting that you bring up social realism, as I haven't considered that my work was concerned with that until recently.<sup>106</sup> I am

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<sup>104</sup> *Looking for Eric*, Dir. Ken Loach (2009).

<sup>105</sup> For example Amber Collective's film *T. Dan Smith*, an experimental documentary, about the shamed councillor T. Dan Smith, incorporates documentary footage, interviews and fictional drama. The characters in this semi-fictional film play themselves. *T. Dan Smith*, Dir. Amber Production Team, Amber Films, 1987.

<sup>106</sup> It can be argued that *Rules of Engagement* shares some of the core concerns within social realism in cinema, with its focus on real and everyday as a way to explore and critique social structures. Raymond William's essay *A Lecture on Realism* provided a useful set of 4 defining features of social realist films: secularity, social extension (including characters of marginal or underrepresented groups), contemporary everyday setting and political intent. There are elements of social criticism in the work by



not going to work with the people who've I've collected the stories from. I am either going to work with actors or finding ordinary people who have had similar experiences to act on screen. Instead of auditioning for screen ability I would audition for actors or non-actors who've shared the experiences they are going to re-enact.

PETER

I am thinking of the film *Hotel of the Stars*<sup>107</sup> by Jon Bang Carlsen – have you seen it?

CECILIA

No.

PETER

It's a documentary, and it's set in a hotel traditionally used by actors, in Los Angeles. The film is a staged documentary. The characters in the film are playing themselves, extras with an aspiration of stardom. The dialogue is written by Bang Carlsen, and is based on research into each participant. The performances feel re-enacted rather than natural; the characters are acting out their own life on camera unconvincingly. The film taps into a lot of things that you are skirting around, especially how you planning to populate this with actors or non-actors.<sup>108</sup>

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questioning unwritten social protocols that ultimately are connected to socio-economic factors, but political intent is not within its core. Raymond Williams 'A Lecture on Realism' *Screen*, Vol 18(01) (1977), pp. 61-74.

<sup>107</sup> *Hotel of the Stars*, Dir. Jon Bang Carlsen (1981).

<sup>108</sup> Bang Carlsen's work became a reference point for his blurring of fact and fiction, in his own words: "*documentaries are no more 'real' than fiction films and fiction films are no more fabulating than documentaries. There is no "reality" that cannot be seen from a different angle and be revealed as a dream. To describe the world, you have to define the truth in a way that does not exclude lies.*" Jon Bang Carlsen, *Danish Film Institute: POETICS OF CINEMA: INVENTING REALITY* (2007).

<http://www.dfi.dk/Service/English/News-and-publications/FILM-Magazine/Artikler-fra-tidsskriftet-FILM/60/Poetics-of-Cinema-Inventing-Reality.aspx>

[Accessed: 14.09.2017]

CECILIA

Essentially, I want to take something that is a real experience, form a character from that and then hand it over to for someone else to re-interpret. What if you choose to work with someone who can relate to the scenario personally and through his or her own experiences? Would they then be better able to inhabit the character rather than merely playing the character?

PETER

And you are introducing the vignette by a headshot of each character?

CECILIA

As a way to activate the audience and to offer the opportunity for them to question whether the character they are watching is real or not.

KEITH

The script is interesting from that point of view, I know it's a work in progress, but it takes us back to that deliberately ambiguity you referred to before; we are not sure what we are watching and so begin to question if this is a kind of reconstruction? Is this a fiction film?

CECILIA

It is all based on three captured conversations that were transcribed. Before I knew what to do with the material I audio recorded an edited version of the transcripts with students from the theatre society. These recordings were only partially successful and were part of an early idea for *Rules of Engagement* consisting of two wide shots based on Nadia's and Robin's conversations, one set in a lab environment and the other in a pub environment, populated by people. The original discussions would be re-enacted as voice-over and played over the shots. Occasionally something would happen in the image that connected to the voice-over, thereby creating a deliberate connect and disconnect between image and sound. This early idea was heavily inspired by two artworks In

*Orgia*<sup>109</sup> by Lars Nilsson and *The Girl Chewing Gum*<sup>110</sup> by John Smith. Nilsson's work is a single static wide-shot, set in a pastoral landscape flanked by modern buildings. Pedestrians cross the frame occasionally, a group of young men play football in the middle, to the left a group of men are making mild threats to each other and to the right of the frame a group of 6-7 people are involved in casual group sex. The film, set in a heightened universe, is a narrative arrested and preserved in a time-based format. Smith's work, *The Girl Chewing Gum*, starts at a Hackney intersection with people and cars going past the camera, a voice over provides directions for the movements of people, as well as those of pigeons and a clock's hands. It is revealed that the voice, Smith himself, is located somewhere far away in a field. The work plays with the audience belief in the narrator, ultimately questioning the authority of voice-over narration on screen. *Rules of Engagement* was guided by these two works in the beginning: Nilsson's painterly tableaux vivant and Smith's voice-over deception. But when I began to write the screenplay, I realise it had to move towards a more conventional narrative as the scenarios and emotions I wanted to convey needed more than just one setup per vignette.

#### KEITH

Jack's story had the sensibility almost of *The Graduate*.<sup>111</sup> Dustin Hoffman [playing Benjamin Braddock] is very much a stranger and the audience experience this through his eyes, particularly the domestic scenes. It felt very much like these characters were part of but simultaneously estranged from their surroundings, not in dramatic ways but in everyday banal ways, which produced a kind of monologue. Often we don't even hear our own monologue in our head, but we are having a monologue, about trying to fit in but not fitting comfortably. I don't know if this is

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<sup>109</sup> *In Orgia*, Lars Nilsson, 23-minute long single-channel Video, 2004.

<sup>110</sup> *The Girl Chewing Gum*, Dir. John Smith, short film, LUX, 1976.

<sup>111</sup> *The Graduate*, Dir. Mike Nicholls (1967).

deliberate or not, but at some point, particularly with Robin's story, it started to feel like a re-construction, more didactic. There is an element of explaining what's going on, more like an interview and that inner monologue was lost.

CECILIA

I agree Robin's story is set in an environment I am unfamiliar with. I know what it's like to start a new job and not knowing how to fit in and I know what it is like to come home to your family and feeling estranged. But I haven't experienced the scenario Robin is describing. So, I felt compelled to try and enter into that, semi-vicariously. My interest in Robin's story is a person who is curious about a particular kind of scene, a scene that he has pre-conceived ideas about, a group that represent alternative practices, that has their own set of rules, but at the same time are very ordinary people. What interests me is the irony that Robin doesn't know how to relate to this 'alternative' group because they are so 'normal'. The two other stories, where a character is trying to fit in with new work colleagues and the other, feeling estranged from his family, are more universal and therefore needed less explication. So, it's a balance with Robin's story, without explaining it how a wider audience can relate to this quite niche social group.

PETER

I really like those feelings of estrangement that you talked about and I suppose my question about the script is the more I read it, the more I felt it was text heavy. I kept thinking about what you can take out and how much can be done visually. I keep thinking of Roy Andersson, where there be something much more distancing about silence.

CECILIA

I agree with you, and I thought a lot about what drives the narrative. As soon as you add words, particularly voice-over, you get distracted from the images in front of you. Can you take away all of the words? Roy Andersson is a good example of visual storytelling because he developed his own unique storytelling technique by producing advertising mostly without or very little dialogue. His films do contain dialogue, but he uses it so sparingly that the words become punch lines. His dialogue is often sampled from poetry, literature, and scripture intermixed with everyday speech.<sup>112</sup> As I am going to use voice-over, most of the decisions of what text to include will happen in the editing suite.

A beat.

CECILIA

At the moment, the big issue is how can I make this work if I have very little financial support. I don't need a big budget; this kind of filmmaking isn't expensive. But it has to be executed in a certain way; it has to achieve a certain look and quality of the image.

KEITH

This is the cinematic part; you need that to achieve that kind of feel. I am just coming back on what Peter said, and I agree that the draft is very text heavy. For example, when Robin says "*they are quite an interlinked group with a lot of unwritten rules*"... it sounds like a sociological lecture.<sup>113</sup> But then the actual dialogue is minimal.

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<sup>112</sup> Ursula Lindquist, *Songs from the Second Floor – Contemplating the art of existence*, Seattle: (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), pp. 77.

<sup>113</sup> Keith's comment made me think of Zygmunt Bauman who wrote "*We are socialised – transformed into a being capable of living in a society – by the internalization of social pressures*" Zygmunt Bauman in Bauman & May *Sociological Thinking*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edn. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers 2001), pp. 24.

CECILIA

Do I keep any of the on-screen dialogue and voice-over?<sup>114</sup> The voice-over I can record and then decide not to include, it would be trickier to edit out on screen dialogue. On-screen dialogue ads cost, but I don't want that to be the reason to take it out.<sup>115</sup>

KEITH

Are you just having one camera setup per scene?

CECILIA

I always start with the idea of one setup per scene, then I inevitably add more shots. A part from the three tight headshots at the beginning of each vignette, where the characters look into the camera, each scene relies on a wide master setup.

KEITH

I like the headshots.

CECILIA

I always film a headshot during auditions, I ask the actor to look at the camera for a minute. It reveals so much more about the person than from a regular improvisation. It's a technique I've borrowed from Duane Hopkins who produced an early short film of mine. For me, this technique inevitably links to Andy Warhol's *Screen Tests*<sup>116</sup> a series of unbroken film portraits, which lends its title from auditions in the film and television industry.

KEITH

How does that work?

CECILIA

First of all, if they start trying to act, it's a 'no'! For instance, I was looking for an actor to play Steve, an aggressive character, in my short film *In Waiting*<sup>117</sup>. We had been

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<sup>114</sup> This conversation took place before the decision to drop all dialogue and voice over.

<sup>115</sup> Synchronised dialogue adds to production cost in terms of recording equipment, soundproofing and complicates the sound mixing in postproduction.

<sup>116</sup> *Screen Tests*, Dir. Andy Warhol (1964-66).

<sup>117</sup> *In Waiting*, Dir. Cecilia Stenbom (2014).

looking for a while and auditioned several actors without success. Then Dylan, an actor came, and when we did the exercise, you could sense a snippet of real aggression in the headshot, and I knew straight away he was the one for the part. It is something that happens when you put a camera on someone that is really revealing and it's not necessarily about them being comfortable in front of the camera, it's often more interesting if they are not. It's about having that relationship with the camera.

KEITH

And how do you see the intimate headshots with the wide contextual shots going together?

CECILIA

The headshots do two things; firstly, it takes the character out of its fictional context muddling up notions of real and fiction further, and secondly, it shakes the expectations of narrative drama. The idea is then to go from the headshots, cleared of context directly into the wide shot, with the character placed in his/her environment. The close-up is a way to familiarise with the character's face; the wide shot tells the audience who the characters are, where he/she is going and how the environment reacts to him/her. In a way the wide shot reveals much more about the character than the close-ups. For example, filmmaker Roy Andersson, who is influenced by André Bazin, often discusses "the complex image", the wide shot including the character and the space that surrounds the character. He argues that the complex image is the superior way to reveal a character on the contrary to the conventional trope of using close-ups to reveal the character's inner emotional state.<sup>118</sup>

PETER

I think going back to, what you have got going to you in this; you talk very much about

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<sup>118</sup> Roy Andersson, *Vår tids rädsla för allvar* (Our time's fear of seriousness) 3rd edn. (Stockholm: Studio 24 Distribution, 2009) (First published 1995), pp. 32-37.

quotidian reality, so that idea of pace and timing you've got some leeway in that. You can make things just slightly boring. I keep thinking that [Yasujirō] Ozu<sup>119</sup> film, the characters leave the room, the camera is static and nothing happens for a very long time.

KEITH

*Court*<sup>120</sup> is a recent film, it's made by a first-time filmmaker about a court case, a political activist that has been put up in a dispute and is charged, it's not a typical film out of India it's almost documentary-like. There is this one shot, towards the end of the film, and the judge has dismissed everybody, dismissed the case, and he gets up and walks out, and everyone gets out, and you expect that is where it should cut but it doesn't cut; then the stewards and security guards come together and chat and the camera is static the whole time with a wide and it's absolutely gripping; part of you are thinking this is audacious when is it going to cut, but you are also in that moment in that room you can smell it and you can feel it, because the room before was packed and heavy and suddenly it all drains away, but you can feel the sensation and it goes on and on and on to the point when even the lights go off, and we are all sitting there in darkness, and the camera is still rolling, and then the sound goes and we know we are not there anymore. The scene produced this amazing round of applause amongst the audience; they've never seen anything like it. And he's [the filmmaker Chaitanya Tamhane] really pushed it, and it works.

CECILIA

A long take is an opportunity for the image itself to tell the story without relying on other images, it creates a space for the mis-en-scene to develop.<sup>121</sup> However it is a fine

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<sup>119</sup> *Tokyo Story*, Dir. Yasujirō Ozu, BFI Distribution, 1953.

<sup>120</sup> *Court*, Dir. Chaitanya Tamhane, Day For Night, 2014.

<sup>121</sup> This corresponds to Brian Henderson's, 'The Long Take' in Bill Nichols (ed.) *Movies and Methods – An Anthology* (London: University of California Press, 1976). His article



balance when that works and when it becomes self-indulgent.

KEITH

Just have a look at this film and see what you think of it.

Keith looks at his clock and starts to fidget.

KEITH

I'm sorry I have to dash.

Keith starts collecting his things.

PETER

Nice to see you.

KEITH

It was interesting to talk about the work.

PETER

I think we've covered everything, especially about how it's shot and the pace.

Keith walks towards the door.

KEITH

OK, see you.

CECILIA & PETER

Bye!

Keith exits the room.

PETER

I think Keith made a really good point of how you link all these things up into the more formal enquiries in your work. And how does that tap into things that you've been talking about?

Peter looks at the outline document on the table.

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features the work of directors F.W. Mornau, Max Ophüls and Orson Welles in the relation between mis-en-scene and the long take.

PETER

What you've written in the background aspect, is the thing you need to figure out next. Rather than just throwing in 'Debord' and 'Deleuze'.

CECILIA

Debord is relevant because in contextualising the relationships between moving image narratives, real life and a media-saturated and commodity-driven culture *Society of The Spectacle* comes close at putting the finger on the inversion of real life and representation that I am seeking to explore with my own work.<sup>122</sup> I find Deleuze really hard to read, but I can appreciate him on a practical level.<sup>123</sup> The outline might look a little thrown together though at this stage.

PETER

Absolutely but in a way, it needs to be, and that's what we talked about before, make the work and figure all that out later.

Cecilia fidgets in her seat.

CECILIA

When I bring in theory, it easily overpowers everything. The risk is that the film becomes an illustration of an intellectual enquiry.

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<sup>122</sup> Debord writes about this inversion: "*Objective reality present on both sides. Each of this seemingly fixed concepts has no other basis than its transformation into its opposite; reality emerges within the spectacle and the spectacle is real. [...] In a world that is really upside down, the true is a moment of the false.*" Guy Debord, *Society of the spectacle* (London: Rebel Press, 2006). (First published 1967), pp. 6-7.

<sup>123</sup> This is a stretched truth; I struggled with Deleuze's writing on cinema [Cinema I and Cinema II]. I did however find the You Tube film '*Is Deleuze's Film Theory Useful?*' a video tutorial by script and story consultant Anthony Metivier helpful in a practical sense. Metivier's claims that Deleuze explains how cinema compares to human thinking; how the viewer becomes fused with the moving images and this accounts for why the audience becomes emotionally invested. Anthony Metivier, '*Is Deleuze's Film Theory Useful?*' *Youtube* (2012). Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zaXQdjMxG6E> [Accessed: 12.09.2017]

PETER

Absolutely, that pressure will increase as you go on. The points you make, there is a connection in what you were originally thinking about, the question, the idea of ritualised communication within commodity culture and how that is played out in screen-based narratives, there is a lot of digging you can do around that.

Cecilia nods.

PETER

And reality and filmic-reality, it's quite a generous field.

CECILIA

That's the problem; it is so vast, at some point, I need to firm up the conceptual underpinning, otherwise it will all collapse.

PETER

Totally, there is no argument there. I just think that you should eventually try and figure out the frameworks. But it has to be close to the things that you love. Because that's when it is really exciting to read – and will be exciting to watch. The background aspect is the parallel concern that you should have. Without going too far into it, without killing it or influencing it too much, or to know too much of what you are doing.

CECILIA

That is the challenge.

PETER

I think that's the problem with you, you spoke about previous works and your tendency to make the work *"do exactly what it says on the tin"*, and I think that you are a long way from that. The next thing, how you tie, how you centre in on those connections, to define your central concern. There is a link, but I wouldn't let it influence you now, in the making of the film.

PETER looks at his wristwatch.

CECILIA

I am at a stage now where I've really started enjoying the work, writing it, visualising it, drawing it, it's the most enjoyable part of the process, it's got perfect potential and then it's all about how much or little I am going to screw it up.

PETER

Exactly! I am going to have to go now.

PETER gets up.

PETER

Ok, see you.

CECILIA

See you.

Peter leaves the room. Cecilia looks down at the desk full of paper.

### 3.2 Further Development and Formal Decisions

The actual conversation, which the above script is based on, took place eight months before filming, a year before the final edit of the film was ready and 18 months before *Rules of Engagement* first screened to the public. Below is a summary of the development and formal decisions made in the development of the film.

Early in the development, I had the idea of introducing each character by a headshot as a way to activate the audience, breaking the fourth wall and the illusion of a fictional drama by addressing the audience directly. As mentioned in the conversation above, the idea for the portraits came from an audition technique that evolved into real-time durational portraits of each character. The duration of these portraits will be discussed further in *Chapter 6: Notes*.

This conversation took place before all dialogue and voice-over had been removed from the script; this decision grew organically, I wanted the film to be less explicit, less of an explication and more of a visual and visceral experience of each scenario. With every draft, I cut dialogue until I decided to remove it completely. The lack of speech created a

void that drew out the awkwardness in each scenario, which suited the theme of the film. I created situations wherein the lack of speech became apparent such as greetings, ordering a drink at a bar and interacting with work colleagues.

During the development, two other factors played a part in the decision to remove the dialogue. Firstly, as I took documentary re-enactment as the initial starting point for the look and feel of the film and in analysing the shot compositions in this kind material I watched it with the sound turned off, which drew more attention to the images and construction of the moving image narrative. Secondly during the development process, I also worked on other projects, which were stripped of speech for a variety of reasons: *REMAKE*<sup>124</sup>, a set of recreated film interiors that had no characters in it, *Parallel*<sup>125</sup>, a commission that couldn't contain dialogue and *BEAM REACH BLASTING*<sup>126</sup>, an experimental documentary and collaboration with a musician who didn't want to include speech in the work. I was reluctant to exclude speech as almost my entire back catalogue of films contained dialogue or text but the resulting films revealed a cinematic word deprived of words, which drew more attention to the image itself.

The process of removing sound and creating a stripped-bare drama reliant on visual storytelling and gestures, naturally led to thinking around early cinema and silent film. This guided my work with the actors, specifically with Wayne Lancaster who played Jack.

The removal of dialogue also placed Robin's story in a much more ambiguous space. From being a story set in a particular context, a 'Munch', it turned into an unspecified get-together of like-minded people. I kept a couple of details that would allude to the world originally described, namely the studded leather collar and the traffic light coloured sweets. Robin's story along with Nadia's and Jack's did change as the actors were cast and I started to work with them to craft the performance. I will discuss the casting process further in *Chapter 4: Recollection*.

The idea to insert a physical screen in each vignette showing an extract from the other vignettes came relatively late in the development process. I had initially toyed with the

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<sup>124</sup> *REMAKE*, Cecilia Stenbom, single screen film, 2016.

<sup>125</sup> *Parallel*, Cecilia Stenbom, single screen film, 2016.

<sup>126</sup> *BEAM REACH BLASTING*, Cecilia Stenbom & Chris Sharkey, single screen film, 2017.

idea of splitting the screen at certain points to connect the three vignettes - a device commonly used in both gallery and narrative film to expose two or more narrative strands. However, in the end, I wanted to seamlessly combine the different vignettes by inserting a physical device - a screen, which could do just that. Jack's vignette already featured a TV screen, and it was a natural addition for the bar, whereas I had to write an entire scene where Nadia looks at a film on her laptop during her lunch break.

I also made further additions into the script, which were not from the original transcript and were wholly made up; for example, Jack getting corrected for taking a cold beer out of the fridge or Robin flirting with the woman he meets at the gathering. In these instances, I allowed for pure fiction to make a compelling story out of the real-life testimonies.

### **3.3 Summary**

How do you truthfully talk about a part of a process that is seldom recorded? How do you capture the concepts, thoughts and narratives that are part of the development process when they are continually changed, re-ordered and edited? Can you relay a process without mediating it?

The purpose of this chapter is to capture the development process, and the discussion relayed above comes as close to capturing development 'mid-air' as it exposes the thinking behind decisions made. This process, part of an investigation into how filmmaking can be deployed to complicate the blurred boundary between reality and fiction, exposes how the intent, concept, form and structure of the work ultimately morphs and changes during the development. Furthermore, by capturing this part of the process as dialogue based on a real conversation, this text becomes entangled within the investigation it pursues.

With this chapter, I also wanted to link the initial ideas to the modified research question, and again the conversation took place at a crucial time when the focus was about to shift. I had already realised that the project was not focused on commodity culture but rather on moving image, and that filmmaking itself was its primary methodology. This connected to the questions and the thematic exploration of the research and the film as expressed in the conversation: *"Do the moving images that*

*surround us, the narratives we consume, influence our construction of social reality and ultimately the social protocols we adhere to?"*

This conversation also gives a glimpse of several parallel discussions concerning the film's approaches. For example the visual development of the film (creating a world that sits in between the seemingly real and the purely fictional); the use of visual storytelling (the balance between allowing the audience to relate without explaining or making the scenarios too explicit); the approach to casting and its relation to established methods within social realism filmmaking; and filmmaking tropes that feed into the idea of the representation of quotidian reality, such as 'the long take' and 'the wide staged' shot.

The next chapter *Blueprint* revisits the project at a different stage - just before principal photography, a moment when formal decisions have been taken, and the whole project is summed up in a set of written instructions spread across the creative team, both behind and in front of the camera.

## Chapter 4: Blueprint

The following chapter is based on the scene structure of the shooting script for *Rules of Engagement* along with notes and references used in the lead-up and during the filming. The material includes notes for cast and crew such as character descriptions, shooting strategy, location and lighting descriptions. The chapter further explores the main structural influences, namely documentary re-enactment, chamber drama and soap opera, which were used as jumping off points and guides during the realisation of *Rules of Engagement*. To highlight the complex layers of references, I have deliberately excluded the actual screenplay itself: the film's *blueprint*.<sup>127</sup>

The purpose of this chapter is to present the intricate weave of references and notes that informed the film, exploring re-appropriation and re-interpretation as methodologies for exploiting the fluctuating border between reality and fiction. The use of references contributed to the process in two ways; firstly, as a tool for crafting the performances and images with cast and crew and, secondly, as familiar constructs to re-appropriate and structure the narrative around.

### 4.1 Collaboration and Co-creation

The pre-production and production of *Rules of Engagement* relied on several collaborative processes, which fed into the methodology of re-appropriation and re-interpretation.

In a collaborative approach, where two or more practitioners with defined roles work together, there is room for artistic freedom. Ultimately though, it is the creative leader of the project (director or artist) that steers the work. A co-creative approach goes deeper into the process with a less hierarchical structure, and it is from these co-creative relationships that something new and unexpected is most likely to emerge.

The key creative relationships behind the camera in the making of *Rules of Engagement* required different types of collaboration. Producer Gerry Maguire was involved with the

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<sup>127</sup> The 'blueprint stage' is a term for a stage in film-production when the screenplay acts as the guide for the production. Claudia Sternberg, *Writing for the Screen: The American Motion-Picture Screenplay as Text* (Tübingen: Stauffenberg: 1997), pp. 50-52.



project from the early stages of development; we discussed the project at length - both its feasibility as well as the artistic and conceptual foundation. He gave feedback on early drafts of the screenplay, as well as assembled the crew based on the creative outline of the project. This collaborative approach is well defined: Maguire has artistic input, but his principal role is as a facilitator and producer of the project.

Emma Dalesman, the cinematographer, is a long-term collaborator. We developed the cinematography together based on the core concepts of the project – both of us contributing to the references used in the film; in this sense, the collaboration with Dalesman is a co-creative approach.

*Rules of Engagement* was a first-time collaboration with production designer Mike McLoughlin. From the outset, he requested precise notes and instructions, resulting in a more straightforward collaborative approach rather than a co-creative exchange.

To conclude: the collaborative and co-creative approaches in the pre-production and production phase were dependent on the individual collaborators, their roles within the production and the length of the partnership.

## **4.2 Script Outline and Scene References**

### **1.1. INT. NEUTRAL WHITE ROOM – DAYTIME.**

*NADIA looks straight into the camera.*

A clip of Andy Warhol *Screen Tests, No 3*<sup>128</sup> of Edie Sedgwick was used as a reference for the headshot portraits.

Excerpt from NADIA's character description: "*Nadia, 23 years, is pursuing a pharmacology degree. She is doing a 6-month work placement at the chemotherapy unit at the 'Rikshospital' in Denmark. She has left her boyfriend, friends and family behind and feels like a fish out of water. She looks like a punk with a lip piercing and spiky black hair. Nadia's new colleagues are older and ultra-conservative; they are not sure of what to make of her.*"

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<sup>128</sup> Andy Warhol, *Screen Tests* (1964-66).

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hLW\\_sXv44Uc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hLW_sXv44Uc) [accessed on 28.05.2018]

### 1.2. INT. CORRIDOR – DAYTIME.<sup>129</sup>

*NADIA walks along a long corridor.*

Note for Rhiannon (who played NADIA): “NADIA is doing something for the very first time, and naturally she will feel a sense of fear and trepidation; she is experiencing her first ‘grown-up’ workplace and there are many ways she can ‘screw’ things up.” I shared a link to *Hopptornet*<sup>130</sup>, a short documentary about ordinary people attempting to jump off the 10-meter diving board. A fixed camera captured participants in the diving platform braving themselves up for jumping (and in some cases not jumping).

### 1.3. INT. LAB FACILITY – DAYTIME.

*NADIA enters the lab facility and meets her work colleagues for the first time.*

From interior and lighting description: “Set in a clinical facility, a science fiction look. The room is glaringly white. The light distributes evenly over the characters and furniture; the shadows are soft. There is no way of telling the time of day; there is no natural light in sight, this could be set in outer space.” Nadia had originally described the lab as ‘Science Fiction’. I used an interior from Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*<sup>131</sup> (the space station reception area with white panelled floor and ceiling) as a visual reference for the space.

Note for the cast: “The interaction should feel ritualised and stilted; deadpan, matter-of-fact and not emotional”. As an acting reference for this scene I shared a clip from the film *The Lobster*.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Scene cut from film.

<sup>130</sup> *Hopptornet*, Dir. Axel Danielson & Maximilien Van Aertryck, Folkets Bio AB, 2016. Link to film no longer accessible.

<sup>131</sup> *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Dir. Stanley Kubrick, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1968.

<sup>132</sup> *The Lobster*, Dir. Yorgos Lanthimos, Film4, 2016.

Clip referenced available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uj1d0iYGkdo> [accessed on 22.02.2018]

#### 1.4. INT. LAB FACILITY, DRESSING ROOM ADJACENT TO CLINICAL AREA – DAYTIME.

*NADIA is being inducted to the laboratory facility and is going through a gowning process with a senior colleague.*

For this scene, we set out to re-create a real 'gowning process', based on Nadia's original description. To prepare the actors for this scene, I shared the instructional video *Entering Clean Room*<sup>133</sup>, which goes through a process similar to what Nadia had described.

This scene was set in the gowning area but featured a brief cut away into the laboratory itself. The idea for the look for the lab facility came from a scene with a fictional photosensitive lab in the Norwegian TV drama *Frikjent*<sup>134</sup>. As photosensitive labs have tinted windows, a cutaway into a room with people dressed in protective clothing, through a tinted lens, was an effective and economical way of creating an illusion of a laboratory facility.

#### 1.5. INT. COFFEE ROOM – DAYTIME.

*NADIA is alone in the staff room. A couple of colleagues enters and sets the room up for a leaving celebration.*

Note for Rhiannon: *"There is a sense of disconnect between Nadia and her colleagues, this scene encapsulates the institutional coldness of the workplace Nadia is trying to become accepted into".* I shared a clip from Roy Andersson's film *You, the Living*<sup>135</sup>. The clip is set in a psychiatrist clinic. There is little interaction between the patients or staff. In the scene a psychiatrist addresses the camera about being burned out by his patients' desire to become happy.

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<sup>133</sup> Link to clip *Entering Clean Room* no longer available.

<sup>134</sup> *Frikjent*, NRK, Fremantle Media International, 2015-2016.

<sup>135</sup> *You the living*, Dir. Roy Andersson, Artificial Eye Film Co. Ltd, 2007.

Clip referenced available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eJAWzEYPXBM> [accessed on 15.09.2017]

1.6. INT. LAB FACILITY, DRESSING ROOM – DAYTIME.<sup>136</sup>

*NADIA is in the dressing room with a colleague. Nadia is building up enough courage to initiate a conversation.*

Reference for Rhiannon: “Nadia doesn’t understand the social code of her workplace; the feeling of rejection is burning inside of her”. I shared a clip from *Muriel’s Wedding*<sup>137</sup>. In the clip, Muriel is seated with a group of women discussing a holiday they are about to go on, but when Muriel wrongly assumes she is also coming, she is told that by the other women that they no longer wish to be friends with her.

1.7. LAB, COFFEE ROOM – DAYTIME.

*NADIA is alone in the staff room; she is eating and watching something on her laptop screen.*

There were no specific references for this scene.

1.8. INT. LAB FACILITY – DAYTIME.

*NADIA enters the room; her colleagues are busy looking at something under the fume hood.*

To prepare the cast for this scene, I shared the clip *Scientist at work in laboratory*<sup>138</sup> with the cast as a reference for the activities and movements in a laboratory.

2.1. INT. NEUTRAL WHITE ROOM.

*ROBIN looks straight into the camera.*

Excerpt from ROBIN’s character description: “Robin is around 35 years of age. Robin stands out in a crowd and is perceived as ‘different’. Although socially awkward, Robin is curious to find out about this new social scene.”

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<sup>136</sup> Scene cut from film.

<sup>137</sup> *Muriel’s Wedding*, Dir. P. J. Hogan, Buena Vista International UK, 1994.

Clip referenced available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SyiA\\_t-8c7Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SyiA_t-8c7Y) [accessed on 15 2017]

<sup>138</sup> Clip *Scientist at work in laboratory* referenced available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tao0Aes5bko> [accessed on 04.04.2018]

## 2.2. INT. PUB - DAYTIME.

*ROBIN enters the pub; he wrongly assumes a woman with pink hair is part of the social gathering he is attending.*

Lighting and location description: *"I want it to have a dirty feel. The daylight has to force its way through the stale and dusty air; this place never really turns to day; darkness prevails here providing comfort for the characters inhabiting this place."* ROBIN's vignette was set in an ordinary pub inhabited by an alternative scene. To develop the look, I used bar interiors from *Fight Club*<sup>139</sup>. The interiors of the film, set in between a real and imagined world, had a green tint had a slightly dirty look.

## 2.3. INT. PUB - BACK ROOM - DAYTIME.

*ROBIN enters the 'Private Party'. He greets the Hostess too enthusiastically.*

'The Hostess' that Robin had originally described to me made me think of the fictional dominatrix 'Lady Heather' a re-occurring character in *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*<sup>140</sup>, whose fetish club featured in several murder investigations. The attractive and well-spoken 'Lady Heather' acts as an ambassador for the BDSM scene, explaining and defending its merits to the police and ultimately the viewer.

## 2.4. INT. PUB - BAR - DAYTIME.

*ROBIN comes back out to the bar, orders himself a drink but finds the atmosphere in the bar hostile and returns to the back room.*

Reference for Steve (who played ROBIN): *"There is something deadpan in the situation that ROBIN finds himself in. The exchanges between characters all play out in the glances between them"*. I shared a clip from Kaurusmäki's *Dogs Have No Hell*<sup>141</sup>, which sees a man entering a bar, ordering a drink and sitting down, the clip has minimal dialogue; most is communicated by looks.

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<sup>139</sup> *Fight Club*, Dir. David Fincher, 20th Century Fox, 1999.

<sup>140</sup> *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, Prod. CBS Paramount Network Television, 2000-2015.

<sup>141</sup> *Dogs Have No Hell*, Dir. Aki Kaurusmäki (Part of Ten Minutes Older: The Trumpet), Blue Dolphin Film Distribution, 2002.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zgi9-Vjtt48> [accessed on 15.09.2017]

## 2.5. INT. PUB - BACK ROOM - DAYTIME.

*ROBIN re-enters the party, sits down at a table with people; he starts to flirt with a woman.*

Reference for Steve; “*ROBIN's confidence is flailing, and it is played out in his thoughts as an inner monologue, although the audience will never hear it, they should feel it.*” I shared the theatrical trailer for *Adaptation*.<sup>142</sup> The trailer begins with a snippet of a scene set in a restaurant with Charlie Kaufmann and an attractive female associate. Charlie's interpretation of the woman's body language is narrated as a voice over.

## 2.6. INT. MEN'S ROOM – DAYTIME.

*ROBIN checks himself in the mirror in the men's room.*

Note for cinematographer: “*This scene must not reference the mirror scene from Taxi Driver*<sup>143</sup> in its framing or lighting setup”.

## 2.7. INT. BACK ROOM - EARLY EVENING.

*ROBIN gets ready to leave the party but wants to say goodbye to the woman he has met.*

There were no specific references for this scene.

## 3.1. INT. NEUTRAL WHITE ROOM.

*JACK looks straight into the camera.*

Excerpt from JACK's character description: “*Jack is the outcast of the family. He is attending a birthday celebrated hosted by his affluent sister and her family. Although he makes his best efforts to fit into his family they do not approve of his lifestyle choices; intimacy has been replaced by pity.*”

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<sup>142</sup>*Adaptation*, Spike Jonze, Columbia Pictures, 2002.

Clip referenced available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0HtZ2M4e\\_AM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0HtZ2M4e_AM) [accessed on 15.09.2017]

<sup>143</sup> *Taxi Driver*, Dir. Martin Scorsese, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 1976.

Clip referenced available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lQkpes3dgzg> [accessed on 04.04.2018]

### 3.2. INT. KITCHEN/DINING, SUBURBAN HOUSE – MIDDAY.

*A kitchen decorated for a party, a vacuum cleaner can be heard off-camera.*

Interior and lighting description: “Suburban middle-class home; open plan, clean and spacious living/dining/kitchen with contemporary or modern finish. The interior should look somewhere between a home and a display. The light is natural but it feels forced. Colour tones are muted.” I referenced a series of films that were set in the domestic settings, which realistically depicted carefully constructed domestic environments such as *Exhibition*<sup>144</sup> and *Stations of the Cross*<sup>145</sup>.

### 3.3. EXT. SUBURBAN HOUSE – MIDDAY.

*JACK is outside the house smoking a cigarette.*

Reference for Wayne (who played JACK): “There is an awkward atmosphere in the house. I want the audience to feel for the main character trying to navigate his family.” I showed Wayne a clip from *Punch Drunk Love*<sup>146</sup>. In the scene Barry, the principal character, shows up at a family party, he hesitates as he opens the door. He appears at the doorway to the kitchen where his sisters are gathered. They remind him of the time they used to call him ‘gay boy’ and how that used to drive him mad. As the scene progresses and the muted torment from the sisters continue, Barry reaches boiling point and smashes the windows in the living room.

### 3.4. INT/EXT. HALLWAY, SUBURBAN HOUSE – MIDDAY.

*JACK enters the hallway and run into his father. Jack hugs him and gives a birthday card.*

For this scene, I used a scene from Joanna Hogg’s *Exhibition*<sup>147</sup> as a reference. In the scene, the main protagonists, ‘D’ and ‘H’, invite a couple of real estate agents into their house; ‘D’ ask the realtors to take off their shoes, which they reluctantly do. I used this scene as an example of how to establish that JACK’s sister as someone who had rules for how to interact in her house.

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<sup>144</sup> *Exhibition*, Dir. Joanna Hogg, BBC films, 2013.

<sup>145</sup> *Stations of the Cross (Kreuzweg)*, Dir. Dietrich Brüggemann, Arrow Film Distributors, 2014.

<sup>146</sup> *Punch Drunk Love*, Dir. Paul Thomas Anderson, Columbia Pictures, 2000.

Clip referenced available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UPanUwQ\\_158](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UPanUwQ_158) [accessed on 15.09.2017]

<sup>147</sup> *Exhibition*, Dir. Joanna Hogg, Artificial Eye Film Co. Ltd, 2013.

Clip referenced available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RBSOGUW5xjo> [accessed on 04.04.2018]

### 3.5. INT. KITCHEN.

*Immaculate buffet laid out, JACK's older sister is trying to make a space for a supermarket bought trifle.*

To get the right look and right food layout we looked at Marks & Spencer's food advertising campaigns<sup>148</sup> as a reference for the production design of this scene.

### 3.6. INT. LIVING ROOM SUBURBAN HOUSE – MIDDAY.

*JACK enters the living room where the family is gathered. He greets everyone in the room and sits down next to his brother-in-law. The brother-in-law shows Jack something on his phone; JACK pretends to show an interest.*

There were no specific references for this scene.

### 3.7. INT. KITCHEN – AFTERNOON.

*The whole family is queuing up for the buffet. JACK decides to jump the queue.*

Reference for Wayne: "There is a comical element to Jack's character. He gets knocked down but gets himself up again. Made me think of Buster Keaton for his ability something to deliver a deadpan character without dialogue." As a reference, I shared a clip from Keaton's *The High Sign*<sup>149</sup>.

### 3.8 INT. KITCHEN/LIVING ROOM – AFTERNOON.

*JACK is watching television with his family, in the background, his sister and mother is preparing a birthday cake.*

A shot from the film *Nebraska*<sup>150</sup> was used as a reference for the cinematography, where the main protagonist and his male relatives are all watching television. The scene is shot from the point of view of the screen; the characters are all looking at it, meaning they all look into the camera.

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<sup>148</sup> Christmas food ad, Marks & Spencer, 2014.

Clip referenced available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VmQgb-rhVWE> [accessed on 04.04.2018]

<sup>149</sup> *The High Sign*, Dir. Buster Keaton and Edward F. Cline, 1921. Available on *Buster Keaton - The Complete Short Films 1917-1923*, Part of 'Master of Cinema series', Eureka Video, 2016.

<sup>150</sup> *Nebraska*, Dir. Alexander Payne, Paramount Pictures UK, 2013.

The shot referenced to can be seen 53 seconds into the theatrical trailer.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YvW\\_DmfKfSk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YvW_DmfKfSk) [accessed on 07.04.18]



### 3.9. INT. KITCHEN – EARLY EVENING.<sup>151</sup>

*JACK walks into the kitchen, with a beer in hand, he exchanges glances with his sister as she fetches a cake; and he then pours down his beer into the sink.*

Reference for production design: “The kitchen needs to look spotless while having a sinister undertone to it. It is an oppressive space.” The inspiration for the look of the kitchen is taken from the film *Safe*<sup>152</sup> a drama/thriller about a suburban housewife who gradually becomes sick from a mysterious ‘environmental illness’.

### 3.10. INT. HALLWAY – EARLY EVENING.

*JACK leaves the house; he shares an awkward moment with his sister.*

There were no specific references for this scene.

## 4.3 Merging Real Life Testimony with Narrative Content

The references mentioned above from screen-based content became a tool for communicating ideas with cast and crew and provided a platform of familiarity. Each reference pointed towards a specific aspect of the production: design, lighting, cinematography and performance.

The references were taken from a cross-section of the kind of screen-based content that feature in everyday life such as cinema, television drama, factual content and advertising. In the same way, I searched for traces of ‘televising’ - the use of screen-based content to describe real events. In the original transcripts, I searched for already-existing screen-based references that related to aspects of the script.

## 4.4 Appropriation of Narrative Constructs

Apart from the references shared with cast and crew, *Rules of Engagement* sought to appropriate narrative constructs connected with the real, mundane and the everyday on the screen, particularly in the forms of documentary re-enactment, chamber play and soap opera. Documentary re-enactment and chamber play, unlike soap opera, are not strictly defined genres *per se*; however, the underlying structures all tie into the project and serve as analogous, formal devices to complicate, delineate and blur the boundaries between fact and fiction.

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<sup>151</sup> Scene cut from film.

<sup>152</sup> *Safe*, Dir. Todd Haynes, Sony Pictures Classics, 1995

Documentary or testimonial re-enactment is a device to represent an undocumented moment on screen, as described by Joseph Lanthier: “*filtering genuine testimony through artifice arrives at a truth that would be otherwise inaccessible.*”<sup>153</sup> This approach is extensively used in documentary filmmaking and television, from the restaging of indigenous Inuit life in Northern Canada in Flaherty’s *Nanook to the North*<sup>154</sup> to ‘infotainment’ television shows such as *Rescue911*<sup>155</sup>, which re-enacted real-life emergencies based on accounts told by rescue workers and members of the public. A more consequential use of documentary re-enactment can be found in *The Thin Blue Line*<sup>156</sup> - a film that looked at an actual murder investigation and re-created the event from the unique perspective of each eyewitness. Each re-enactment contained contradictory statements, which suggested that all or some of the witnesses had committed perjury. Although these three examples are fundamentally different, each sought to recreate actual experiences as moving image narratives.

*Rules of Engagement* is not a documentary re-enactment, but when I created the scenes in the film, I treated them as re-enactments of the accounts. One common ingredient used in documentary re-enactment, which is missing in *Rules of Engagement*, is the voice-over through narration or interviews. The voice is a vital tool making sense of the narratives unfolding, providing a suggestion of veracity and verisimilitude. In preparation for the film shoot, I watched documentary re-enactments with the sound turned off to get a sense of the construction and to see if it was different from conventional fiction drama.<sup>157</sup> I discovered that the re-enactments without sound created a peculiar atmosphere of something being staged, and not quite right, in a way that was distinctly different from watching a drama without sound. I sought to re-create that peculiar atmosphere in *Rules of Engagement*.

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<sup>153</sup> Joseph Jon Lanthier ‘Do you swear to Re-enact the Truth? Dramatized Testimony in Documentary Film’ *International Documentary Association*, 01.05.2011.  
<https://www.documentary.org/magazine/do-you-swear-re-enact-truth-dramatized-testimony-documentary-film> [accessed on 27.11.2015]

<sup>154</sup> *Nanook of the North*, Dir. Robert J. Flaherty, United Artists Corp. Ltd, 1922.

<sup>155</sup> *Rescue911*, Prod. CBS, 1989-1996.

<sup>156</sup> *The Thin Blue Line*, Dir. Errol Morris, British Film Institute Ltd, 1988.

<sup>157</sup> *Rescue 911* and *The Thin Blue Line* were among the material I studied.

Chamber plays or 'Kammerspiel'<sup>158</sup> are based on the concept of chamber music transferred to the stage, presenting plays with a minimal cast and paired down design on intimate stages.<sup>159</sup> The plays themselves were dominated by mood and atmosphere over plot, and although often venturing into the dream, the symbolic and the supernatural (see Strindberg's *Ghost Sonata*<sup>160</sup>), the plays focused on the emotional lives of the characters placed in ordinary environments or domestic settings. The chamber play was brought to the screen by Ingmar Bergman, who not only directed Strindberg plays for the stage, radio and television including *The Ghost Sonata* four times, but re-interpreted the genre for cinema in the 1960s including films such as *Through A Glass Darkly*<sup>161</sup>, *Winter Light*<sup>162</sup> and *The Silence*<sup>163</sup>, and which all concentrated on the inner torment of its central characters. The form evades strict definitions but exists as an important sub-genre within modern drama and arguable relates to Brecht's instructions: "use internal motivation, be oriented strongly to visual effects, compose every millimetre of screen and give the screenplay an individual tone."<sup>164</sup> For me another reference point for the chamber play was Swedish playwright Lars Norén who developed the genre further, for example in *Som löven i Vallombrosa* (1995), a two-part TV play set in a country house during a family weekend get-away, and which deals with the self-deceit and social protocols that holds a bourgeoisie family unit together.

*Rules of Engagement* adheres to many of the principles associated with chamber drama: a reduced plot, minimal cast, each story set within one location. The stories told were simplified; Nadia's six-month placement took place over a few consecutive scenes, Robin's story about the BDSM scene was not explained, only alluded to, and Jack's complicated familial structure was boiled down to a nuclear family unit. I trapped each

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<sup>158</sup> *Kammerspiel* is a term coined in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, with leading exponents being Max Reinhardt and August Strindberg.

<sup>159</sup> L.J. Styan, *Modern drama in theory and Practice* 3. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) pp. 30-32.

<sup>160</sup> August Strindberg's *Spöksonaten* (*The Ghost Sonata*) from 1907 consists of three scenes and is about two men, a young student and a man in a wheelchair, who enters a house inhabited by a strange family. Whilst many of the characters are ghosts or other supernatural creatures the play deals with mendacious family dynamics.

<sup>161</sup> *Såsom i en spegel* (*Through A Glass Darkly*), Dir. Ingmar Bergman, Gala Film Distributors, 1961.

<sup>162</sup> *Nattvardsgästerna* (*Winter Light*), Dir. Ingmar Bergman, Gala Film Distributors, 1963.

<sup>163</sup> *Tystnaden* (*The Silence*), Dir. Ingmar Bergman, Gala Film Distributors, 1963.

<sup>164</sup> Bertolt Brecht in Marc Silberman (ed.) *Bertolt Brecht on Film and Radio* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2000) pp. 5.

character within one physical and formal structure, framing them within carefully composed frames, conveying the inner emotional plight of each central character.

Soap operas – melodramas centred on everyday life, are intended to create emotional appeal via sensational plot twists, exciting characters and dramatic events. Although primarily set in realistic settings, the form exists in a heightened universe, meaning that the audience is aware that it is fiction and not ‘reality’. Soap operas are generally filmed on set (rather than on-location), which restricts camera angles and favours dialogue-driven storytelling. The scenes are often played out in real-time and are usually built around conversations, not physical action, and with static cameras. Soap operas do not neatly resolve their narrative storyline for each episode; in this sense they are more similar to real life than conventional narrative film.<sup>165</sup>

Although the emotional plight of each character takes centre stage in the narrative, *Rules of Engagement* is not driven by a melodramatic story arch to hook the audience. But like the soap operas, *Rules of Engagement* depicts the everyday endeavours of three characters set in distinct interior locations. The camera remains static and uses a limited number of angles. The interiors and characters are heightened versions of real places and people. Although stripped of words, the film is built around the idea of interactions between characters, and as part of the shooting strategy, I sought to capture nuances of glances and subtle exchanges between the characters; creating dialogue without words.

The link between the chamber play and TV serial drama sits in the restrictions of the genres: limited locations focused on the interpersonal and often played out in real time. Inevitably there will be cross-fertilisations between these two constructs; for example when David Jacobs pitched the long-running American TV serial drama *Dallas* to the network, he used Ingmar Bergman’s *Scenes from a Marriage*<sup>166</sup> as a key reference point.<sup>167</sup> Coincidentally Bergman himself enjoyed watching *Dallas* on TV.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> John Williams, *BFI Screenonline* ‘Soap Opera - Unending stories of everyday life’, 2014. <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/tv/id/519828/index.html> [accessed on 27.11.18]

<sup>166</sup> *Scenes from a Marriage*, Dir. Ingmar Bergman, Sveriges Television, 1973. Although *Scenes from a Marriage* might not be classed as one of Bergman’s chamber dramas, it is a story that is contained within single locations, a paired down cast in everyday settings.

<sup>167</sup> B.A. Curran, *DALLAS The Complete Story of the World’s Favourite Prime-Time Soap*. (Tennessee: Cumberland House Publishing, 2004), p. 4.

#### 4.5 Summary - Appropriation on Screen

This chapter sought to explore the complex layers of references that formed *Rules of Engagement*; namely the structural references that informed the screenplay, and the direct references shared with the cast and crew in the build-up to principal photography, all of which created a platform of familiarity and guided the production. Instead of presenting the screenplay I opted to include everything that is not included in it, namely the notes and references I shared directly with cast and crew, in order to draw the attention to the peripheral material that equally contributed to the final film.

This chapter presents appropriation as an integral part of filmmaking, using distinct reference points and structures as guides. This approach is widely used within conventional narrative filmmaking by appropriating narrative constructs or genres. For example, *Thelma and Louise*<sup>169</sup> took the concept of the road movie, typically a male-focused genre, and re-focused it through a female-led cast.<sup>170</sup> Likewise, *Blue Velvet*<sup>171</sup> mixed references from horror to noir to create a neo-noir mystery film<sup>172</sup>. Both films have taken established structures and re-interpreted them as something unique, using the audience's familiarity to create a subversion or reconsideration of the structures that it set out to re-appropriate. This subversion exposes the audiences' reliance on recognisable structures and by doing so tacitly interrogates the space between the real world and the moving image representation that the audience is negotiating.

Appropriation used in the art context evades strict definition.<sup>173</sup> What this research/investigation has been concerned with are moving image practices that

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<sup>168</sup> Mentioned in Geoffrey McNab, 'Ingmar Bergman: auteur, innovator, genius... and a big fan of the Blues Brothers', *The Independent* (28.09.2012).

<sup>169</sup> *Thelma and Louise*, Dir. Ridley Scott, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1991.

<sup>170</sup> Glenn Man, 'Gender, Genre, and Myth in "Thelma and Louise."' *Film Criticism*, vol. 18, no. 1 (1993) pp. 36–53.

<sup>171</sup> *Blue Velvet*, Dir. David Lynch, De Laurentiis Entertainment Group, 1986.

<sup>172</sup> Norman K. Denzin, 'Blue Velvet: Postmodern Contradictions' *Theory, Culture & Society*, 5(2–3) (1988) pp. 461–473.

<sup>173</sup> For example David Evans' summaries it as practices that use material associated with mass media and consumer culture as a resource using examples from Dadaist photo-montage, Pop Art, Situationists and détournement and 'Bricolage'. David Evans, 'Introduction' in *Appropriation, Documents of Contemporary Art* (London & Cambridge: Whitechapel Gallery and The MIT press, 2009), pp. 12–23.

disrupt narrative drama; for example in the single-channel video *Extra*<sup>174</sup>, artist Candice Breitz inserts herself as an extra in scenes of 'Generations' - a South African soap opera depicting black middle-class reality. Breitz, who is white, is clearly visible but isn't part of the narrative and is often inserted in awkward, odd or even ridiculous positions among the entirely black cast, thereby questioning what it might mean to be white in the context of the South Africa of today.<sup>175</sup> Breitz subverts a familiar format, the soap opera, and transposes it from the quotidian/domestic to the gallery context.

The filmic references used in *Rules of Engagement* are not explicitly identifiable in the work – they are only alluded to. I used re-appropriation in *Rules of Engagement* to merge reality with fiction and real scenarios with representations. I deliberately played with a sense of familiarity by referencing existing screen-based constructs while depicting those real and ordinary moments that are not often the focus of screen-based content. I wanted *Rules of Engagement* to have a look and feel of familiar narrative drama but be enough removed, formally, aesthetically and structurally, to provide a critical distance for the audience to engage with the work and its central concerns; namely the entanglement of everyday life experiences and fictional screen representations and the relationship to the social protocols that govern human interaction.

The next chapter *Recollection* re-lives the experience of filming *Rules of Engagement* through recollections of the filming gathered from the principal cast.

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<sup>174</sup> *Extra*, Candice Breitz, Single-channel Video, (2011).

<sup>175</sup> More information about the artwork can be found on *Dak'Art* 2014.  
<http://biennaledakar.org/2014/spip.php?article108> [accessed on 31.05.2018]

## Chapter 5: Recollection

A live-action film is rarely shot 'live' or in chronological order. However, a live-action film does contain a 'live' element - that of the actors, performers or extras captured on camera.

*Chapter 2: Source* looked at how the use of 'found' narratives can be used to highlight or complicate the boundary between real and fiction; *Chapter 3: Conversation* looked at the development process, and *Chapter 4: Blueprint* looked at appropriation in filmmaking and art practices through the references used in *Rules of Engagement*. This chapter brings together recollections of filming *Rules of Engagement* from the perspectives of the three principal actors: Wayne Lancaster, Steve Greenfield and Rhiannon Wilson, capturing their experiences of re-interpreting these real-life stories on camera.

The purpose of this Chapter is to capture the experience of inhabiting the screen in order to untangle the complicated relationship between the realities of a film set, versus the reality that the film sought to represent.

The recollections were recorded in June 2017, roughly five months after the film was shot. I deliberately waited to speak to the actors until I had reached 'picture lock' in the edit, so I would know what the final film would look like and not be influenced by their experiences.<sup>176</sup>

### 5.1 A Note on Casting

The guiding principle for casting of the three principal roles was to find individuals who could relate to the characters and scenarios from their own experiences. I was open to working with both actors and non-actors. Instead of a more conventional casting process, with casting calls and auditions, I opted for an organic search method, via word-of-mouth and social media.

I had worked with Wayne Lancaster who played JACK on a previous project and had him in mind for the role when I started developing the screenplay. Wayne is nearly 15 years

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<sup>176</sup> 'Picture lock' is a term used in filmmaking for when the edit of a film is finished and the production enters the post-production phase with sound mix and colour grade.

older than the real-life Jack. However, as characters, they had a very similar demeanour and are from a similar socio-economic background. Wayne has an acting background but has no formal training.

I thought carefully about how to cast ROBIN; in real life she identifies as transgender, but her story was partially set at a time when she still identified as a man. I decided to remain open regarding gender identification and focused the search on someone who could relate to the specific scenario of not knowing how to fit into a group with set social codes. Steve Greenfield, who identifies himself as gender fluid, does not partake in the BDSM scene but according to his account “*moves in alternative circles*”<sup>177</sup>. Steve could further relate to the outsider narrative with a mixed-race family background, spending his childhood between North East of England and Hong Kong. Steve had a background in performance and street art and some experience of acting for the screen.

For NADIA, I wanted to find someone with a strong and tough exterior yet vulnerable. Initially, I sought someone who had experience of working or studying abroad but could not find the right individual. Rhiannon Wilson had the right look and demeanour, and during our initial meeting, we located several workplace related experiences that were similar to Nadia’s story. Rhiannon is a trained stage actor but had little experience of acting for the screen.

In preparation for the filming, I had several meetings with the cast discussing the characters. I took a hands-off approach and wanted each actor to have room to develop their character. I actively encouraged them to put as much of their own experiences into their role.

## **5.2 A Note on Scheduling**

*Rules of Engagement* was filmed over the course of six days, from Saturday, February 11<sup>th</sup> to Thursday, February 16<sup>th</sup> 2017. As some scenes featured school-aged children, we filmed JACK’s vignette on the weekend, to avoid taking them out of school. With consideration for them, we also filmed their scenes in one block; this meant we shot the outdoor and hallway scenes on the first day and focused on the living room scenes the second day. ROBIN’s vignette was filmed during Monday and Tuesday at The Black Bull

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<sup>177</sup> Steve mentioned this during our initial meeting.



pub in Gateshead town centre, as we knew those days would be quieter in terms of customers. Finally, NADIA's vignette was filmed during the Wednesday and Thursday at various locations inside Gateshead College, and for this we had to work around the college's teaching schedule.

### 5.3 Recollection 1: Wayne Lancaster as JACK

#### SCENE 3.3 EXT. SUBURBAN HOUSE – DAYTIME.

In this scene, JACK is outside smoking a cigarette. Wayne thought his character was dreading the family get-together, reluctant to re-engage with their world. He felt that his character was being dragged in against his will. Wayne linked his character to a scene from the British kitchen sink drama *Saturday night and Sunday morning*<sup>178</sup> in which the main protagonist Arthur Seaton, who does not want to conform to domestic drudgery, throws a stone at an advert for "perfect living" placed outside a housing estate.

This scene was the only scene in the entire film that was shot outside. The weather conditions were treacherous, and there was a discussion of whether JACK's costume, a shirt and denim-jacket, should be altered, but Wayne felt the costume was important to the portrayal of JACK as a 'free thinker'. I asked Wayne if he could remember how he felt during the first few takes: *"In the build-up, to a take, I'm fidgeting, almost like a runner in blocks and as soon as a take starts it's about handing over to instinct."* Wayne felt a pressure to prove himself to the crew on the first day of filming; he felt there was an enormous trust from the crew and if he did not get it right the work would be compromised and everyone's craft would be poorly represented.

#### SCENE 3.4 INT/EXT. HALLWAY – EARLY EVENING.

This scene was set in JACK's sister's hallway. The purpose of this scene was to determine the family dynamic and to establish JACK's position within it. In the scene, JACK hugs his father awkwardly. Paul Mason, who played the father, had not done much acting before the shoot and was not comfortable with hugging a stranger. Wayne felt he had to help him: *"I tried to do something funny with the thing of hugging him, to make him relax, I deliberately kept my feet back and my legs very straight so only my top half hugged him, and I kind of fell into his arms."* Wayne added that he and Paul assumed a father/son role after this scene, which they kept to for the duration of the shoot.

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<sup>178</sup> *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, Dir. Karel Reisz, BFI (Collections), 1960.

The last setup of the scene was a close-up of JACK just as he was about to walk into the living room. I wanted an exaggerated pause from Wayne, a moment of hesitation, and asked Wayne to hold on to the hesitation for longer than he felt comfortable. Wayne felt this request made him more self-aware at the moment, but that subsequently has made him reflect upon how long a pause needs to register on screen.

### SCENE 3.1 INT. WHITE NEUTRAL ROOM.

This scene is the headshot portrait of JACK. For Wayne, this was the only time during the entire filming when he fully acknowledged that somebody would eventually watch the film and this realisation pulled him out of the process of acting. During the first take, Wayne interrupted the filming asking unnecessary crew to leave the room. The lighting created a corona of light in Wayne's field of vision, and felt in his own words "*like a near death experience*". Wayne referred to this scene as a "Trumpton moment"<sup>179</sup> - an idea he had taken from a children's stop-motion animation, where the character appears out from a music box at the end of each programme, looking directly at the audience and thereby breaking the illusion of narrative fiction.<sup>180</sup>

### SCENE 3.10 INT/EXT. HALLWAY – MIDDAY.

The final scene in the film, just a couple of hours after shooting the first hallway scene - the very beginning of the story - which meant that Wayne had to jump chronologically in the story. Wayne had no objections to this leap, and he compared the process of filming out of sequence with Virginia Woolf's idea of time and memory<sup>181</sup>. He explained: "*We experience past, presence and future all mixed up, not in a straight line, and in this sense it*

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<sup>179</sup> *Trumpton* written by Gordon Murray, was first broadcast on BBC in 1967.

<sup>180</sup> This made me think of Bertolt Brecht's essay *Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting* comparing traditional Chinese theatre with European acting. Brecht writes about the alienation effect used in Chinese theatre, a set of techniques that break the illusion of theatre, for example by addressing the audience directly and breaking the so called 'fourth wall'. Brecht in Brecht & Willet (ed.) *Brecht on theatre: the development of an aesthetic* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1978), pp. 90-99.

<sup>181</sup> I am not entirely sure what Wayne refers to here but many of Virginia Woolf's novels travel effortlessly back and forth in time, for example *Mrs Dalloway* from 1925 takes place over one day but travels back and forth in time, or *Orlando* published in 1928, whose main protagonist, a poet, lives for centuries and changes sex from man to woman. Virginia Woolf *Mrs Dalloway* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1987) Virginia Woolf *Orlando: a biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015)

*is close to the actual experience of life [...] In any moment you are always thinking about something else, projecting forwards or remembering things, and when you are responding to that what is in front of you, you are already doing it in a mashed up way, you experience life in a mixed up way; it is not linear.*“ This made me think of Paul Ricœur’s ideas of time and perception: that there are two kinds of time, firstly *cosmological time*, which is linear, and secondly *phenomenological time*, which is how time is experienced regarding the past, present and future. Ricœur also writes about the fictive experience of time in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*.<sup>182</sup>

In the scene JACK gets ready to leave the house, his sister joins him in the hallway. Initially, the sister, played by Sophie Wotton, was going to pick a piece of hair off JACK’s clothes to define her role as the older sister in charge. The hair did not register on the camera, so instead, the scene was improvised, and Sophie used her saliva to clean a stain of JACK’s collar. Wayne felt it was something an older sister would do to a younger brother, as a way of mothering him as a reminder of how they used to get on when they were younger.

#### *SCENE 3.6 INT. LIVING ROOM – MIDDAY.*

The first scene of the second day of shooting: JACK enters the living room where the family is gathered. He greets everyone in the room sits down next to his brother-in-law. The brother-in-law shows JACK something on his phone: JACK pretends to show an interest. Wayne felt empowered at the start of the day: more familiar with the territory as he had more things to do: walking around the table, greeting the children, responding to what was shown to him on the phone. To get a genuine reaction from Wayne I had asked Ian (who played his brother-in-law) to show something different on his phone for every take. In the final take Ian showed Wayne something, which completely threw him; a parody website, and this was the take I chose for the final edit in the film.

#### *SCENE 3.7 INT. KITCHEN – MIDDAY.*

In this scene the whole family is queuing up for the buffet, JACK walks up to the fridge to get a cold beer out only to be corrected by his sister, as he should have taken a beer from the drinks table. JACK takes a beer from the drinks table and walks to the back of the

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<sup>182</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative volume 2* (translation of Temps et récit) (London: The University of Chicago Press Ltd, 1985) pp. 100-152.

queue. When I had found the location, I decided to frame it as a wide shot, so that the whole scene would play out in a single frame; Wayne felt this left him with very little room to hide. For the scene, Wayne created a deliberately awkward walk based on Buster Keaton. Wayne had always admired Buster Keaton and revealed that he had often pretended to be him as a child. Wayne also referred to a type of contextual shot often used in news features, for example when a subject has been asked to walk across the screen and how inevitably unnatural and awkward that would come across.

Wayne and Ian invented their response to the moment in the scene where JACK had to return to the back of the queue; an exchange of glances, Wayne explained: *“he [the brother-in-law character] would most likely have been at the receiving end of this kind of correction given by his wife”*.

#### *SCENE 3.8 INT. LIVING ROOM – AFTERNOON.*

JACK is watching television with his family. In the background, his sister and mother are preparing a birthday cake. The flickering light from the television was achieved by manually creating a flicker effect on one of the lights. Wayne remembers that he and the rest of the cast were drawn to this effect. In the scene Wayne sat next to Edda (8) and Sami (6)<sup>183</sup>, who played the niece and nephew, the dynamic between them seemed real both during and between takes, Wayne felt that as he was an uncle himself he could easily recreate that relationship with them and sustained that throughout the shoot, just as he did with the father, sister and brother-in-law characters.

#### *SCENE 3.9 INT. KITCHEN – AFTERNOON.*

Towards the end of the second shooting day, the crew were losing focus, and this affected Wayne’s ability to concentrate. In the scene JACK walks into the kitchen, with a beer in hand, he exchanges glances with his sister as she fetches a cake, he then pours his beer into the sink. Wayne could not recollect much of it, but he felt that by the end of these two days of filming he had become so absorbed into the character that he did not take much notice of the specific scenes we were shooting.

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<sup>183</sup> Edda and Sami are my children.

## 5.4 Recollection 2: Steve Greenfield as ROBIN

*SCENE 2.2 INT. BAR, FRONT SPACE – DAYTIME.*

ROBIN's entire vignette was shot during opening hours at The Black Bull, a pub near Gateshead town centre. The pub is a bit rough around the edges with an eclectic mix of customers. Steve did not mind the atmosphere and general vibe of the establishment; he felt the clientele "*wouldn't judge him too critically*".

Against my better judgment, I had decided to start with the opening scene, a complicated one with several elements difficult to get right. During the first takes, Steve felt self-conscious, and this was getting in the way of his performance. To create the right look a smoke machine was used, this meant that the setup between takes was longer than usual, nearly 5 minutes, which made it difficult to keep the momentum going.

At the beginning of the day, Steve focused on the relationships and the connection on set between his fellow actors, the crew and the director. Steve thought the lack of full cast rehearsal was challenging as he had wanted to meet the other cast members to find the right dynamic beforehand. It was my decision not to have onset rehearsals, as I wanted to respond to the situation at hand and the dynamic in the room.

*SCENE 2.4 BAR, FRONT SPACE – DAYTIME.*

In this scene, ROBIN orders himself a drink but finds the atmosphere in the bar hostile. Before filming, we had spoken at length about Steve's own experiences of feeling unwelcome in certain contexts. Steve had experiences of pub/bar environments where he needed to defuse a situation by making himself physically smaller to feel less of a target. Steve felt this was the scene where he could make the most use of this experience and where he could do most with no dialogue, working on "*the unspoken thoughts and feelings that don't necessarily require language*."

Two of the men in the scene were patrons who had agreed to be in the film. Steve thought that it was good for the initial takes to get genuine and completely unknown reactions, but as the scene went on he could feel their frustration building (due to the delays, positional changes etc.), and this affected his own concentration.

*SCENE 2.1 INT. WHITE NEUTRAL ROOM.*

ROBIN's headshot portrait. Steve remembers getting into an empty state of mind, staring blankly into the lens, devoid of emotion. After the first 15 seconds, he started to become very self-conscious, feeling everything and every blink became intense. He was trying to stop himself from blinking which made the urge to blink even stronger.

*SCENE 2.3 INT. BAR, BACK ROOM – DAYTIME.*

This was the first scene of the second shooting day with Steve. He felt more comfortable and less nervous. This scene sees ROBIN entering the 'Private Party', he walks up to the woman whom he has identified as the 'Hostess' and greets her with what appears to be a little bit too much enthusiasm for her own liking. After being introduced to other members of the party, ROBIN is left standing awkwardly, unsure of what to do. In this scene I asked Steve to get so close to the Hostess that she would need to take a step back, this worked well on screen, but Steve felt he came in with too much enthusiasm and was trying to do 'too much'. Steve perceived the atmosphere in the room as good but awkward, partially due to the different range of acting experience among the cast in the room. He felt this created an absurd atmosphere but that he harnessed this and the various levels of acting experience in the room to his advantage by exacerbating it. Unbeknownst to Steve most of the extras in this scene had no acting experience at all.

*SCENE 2.6 INT. MEN'S ROOM – DAYTIME.*

In this scene, ROBIN checks himself in the mirror in the men's room. I had asked Emma, the cinematographer, to start filming without alerting Steve. Steve, who got himself into the process of self-exploration while he was waiting for the crew to get ready, thought to himself: *'I hope she is filming this'*. He only realised we were filming halfway through the first take when he momentarily looked straight into the lens and then tried to go on without losing his lack of awareness of the camera. I kept the bit where Steve looked into the camera. I showed Steve the clip but he was not happy that I included it as he felt it reflected poorly upon his acting ability.

*SCENE 2.5 INT. BAR, BACK ROOM – DAYTIME.*

In this scene, ROBIN re-enters the party, sits down at a table of people and starts flirting with a woman. Steve felt that having no dialogue was a definite hurdle in his preparations for the film and he felt that this scene was particularly challenging to

convey realistically without speech. Steve felt that Mimi, who played Robin's 'love interest', was reserved and closed to him at first and he struggled to get the dynamic going. However, as their onscreen relationship progressed he was able to harness her apprehensiveness; he felt he had to work with whatever little she had to give him. There was a moment when Mimi genuinely blushed, which fitted the scene perfectly. During the filming Steve became increasingly frustrated with the other actors in the room, he felt that he was being welcoming and accepting but did not get the same treatment in return. Steve perceived one of the extras, Jodie, as hostile. He thought it was her inexperience of film sets that made her increasingly impatient. Steve felt Jodie broke out of her character as she was talking about how absurd the film was while it was being filmed. Again, unbeknownst to Steve, Jodie had no previous acting experience.

*SCENE 2.7 INT. PUB, BACK ROOM – DAYTIME.*

In this scene, ROBIN gets ready to leave the party, he tries to say goodbye to the woman he has met, but she is engaged in a conversation. As Steve failed to cut into the conversation, he felt genuinely ostracised by the two women, and he channelled the feeling of rejection into his performance. Towards the end of the scene, the woman catches up to ROBIN and hands him a flyer. Steve struggled with timing, as Mimi consistently missed her mark, and it was hard for him to act surprised.

### **5.5 Recollection 3: Rhiannon Wilson as NADIA**

*SCENE 1.6 INT. DRESSING ROOM – DAYTIME.*

Rhiannon felt confident about going into filming in a role with no dialogue, she described it as "*empty space acting, finding something to do with nothing*". Rhiannon's expression 'empty space acting' could possibly come from Peter Brook's seminal book on theatre *The Empty Space*. The book opens with "*I can take an empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and that is all it needed for an act of theatre to be engaged*".<sup>184</sup> In this first scene of NADIA's vignette, she is in the dressing room with a colleague, she is building up enough courage to initiate a conversation, but before she has a chance to do so, her colleague leaves the dressing room. Rhiannon was working with Serena Korda, a non-actor; they had met for the first time only that morning. Rhiannon felt that not knowing the person she was acting with contributed to the awkward atmosphere in the scene, holding on tightly to

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<sup>184</sup> Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (London: Penguin Books Ltd 2008), p. 11.

the feeling of not knowing the other person. The camera was behind Rhiannon for the first set-up of the scene, and she felt it helped her to get into the character as she was facing Serena and not the camera, her limited screen acting experience meant she was not used to the amount of equipment around her. The last camera set-up of the scene was a close-up, and the camera was less than a metre away from Rhiannon's face, by this time she felt relaxed about having the camera near her. We spoke about the experience of being in front of the camera as opposed to the stage. For Rhiannon the key difference between stage and screen work is the different types of nerves she experienced before and during the performance; on camera, the tension was in the awareness of small movements or mistakes that would be recorded and would remain there forever, whereas on stage a small mistake is unlikely to be picked up by the audience.

*SCENE 1.1 INT. WHITE NEUTRAL ROOM – DAYTIME.*

NADIA's headshot portrait. Filming this scene was an intense experience for Rhiannon, and on the screen it was possible to detect her heartbeat. The experience was perpetuated by the fact that it was filmed in a small room, only Emma (the cinematographer) could fit in the room with her, the rest of the crew, including myself, were in the adjoining room. Rhiannon described the experience as *"doing nothing with nothing."*

*SCENE 1.3 INT. LAB FACILITY – DAYTIME.*

NADIA's vignette was filmed at various locations at Gateshead College. The first two scenes were filmed inside a changing room, but this scene was filmed in a chemistry classroom that had been re-dressed as a laboratory facility. Anywhere the camera was not directed still looked very much like a classroom and teaching paraphernalia was pushed out of shot to the edges of the room. Rhiannon used the monitor to get an idea of what the laboratory would look like through the lens. In the scene, NADIA enters the lab facility and meets her work colleagues for the first time. They are somewhat taken aback by her appearance, and there is an awkward pause before anyone greets her. When Rhiannon entered the room during the takes, she genuinely experienced the feeling of being looked up and down and judged by her appearance by the other cast members. Despite the vast open space of this interior location, Rhiannon experienced a feeling of being smothered.



*SCENE 1.8 INT. LAB FACILITY – DAYTIME.*

In this scene NADIA enters the room; her colleagues are busy looking at a piece of technical equipment. NADIA tries to see what is going on; eventually, she gets invited to join in. Rhiannon experienced a sense of relief for her character in this scene. She thought this scene was in many ways the opposite of SCENE 1.3, as her character was desperate to be welcomed in the first scene and in this scene she finally receives an invitation. The shooting order meant that we went from shooting one of the first scenes in the vignette to the last, shooting the bookends of the film consecutively. Rhiannon, used to working chronologically on the stage, confessed to a weird sense of dislocation, the sense she had not adequately experienced the journey her character had been on and that she had to fill in the blanks.

*SCENE 1.5 INT. STAFF ROOM – DAYTIME.*

NADIA is alone in the staff room; her colleagues enter and set up for a leaving celebration; this was a long and painstakingly choreographed scene. Rhiannon enjoyed the ritualistic aspect of the scene; rituals her character wanted to be part of but didn't understand. For her, this scene contained a series of emotional reactions and a subsequent decision-making process: bewilderment, rejection, determination and then mortification. At the end of the scene NADIA gets offered a piece of chocolate, she takes it and starts eating it. Her colleagues look at her with bemusement as none of them has started to eat their chocolate yet. Rhiannon struggled with eating the piece of chocolate; she underestimated what a mouthful of chocolate it was, and it took ages before she was able to swallow, this was perpetuated by the fact that the cast and crew were suppressing the urge to laugh.

*SCENE 1.7 INT. COFFEE ROOM – DAYTIME.*

In this scene NADIA is alone in the staff room; she is eating and watching something on her laptop screen. A colleague walks in and peaks over her shoulder; NADIA closes the laptop, as she does not want her colleague to see what she is watching. Rhiannon felt her character had been backed into a corner in this scene with nowhere to escape. She thought this was an awkward scene to achieve as she felt the movement of shutting the lid of the laptop was abrupt and in the other scenes her movements were generally quite unobtrusive.

#### *SCENE 1.4 INT. GOWNING ROOM – DAYTIME.*

This scene sees NADIA inducted to the laboratory facility and is going through a gowning process with a senior colleague. Rhiannon and Charlie (who played her colleague) had to put on several layers of clothing during this scene. The small room, where it was filmed, got oppressively hot due to the lights. Rhiannon experienced the scene as procedural, and she had to make it look like she was putting the equipment on for the very first time. The character of NADIA's colleague was originally described as brusque, and Rhiannon felt there was certain sternness about the way Charlie was going about in the scene. Rhiannon could feel her colleague's impatience, both in character but also out of character as an acting colleague who just wanted to get the scene right so she could quickly exit that hot and unpleasant space.

### **5.6 The Experience for the Actors**

Wayne, Steve and Rhiannon are very different actors, with varying degree of experience and with different personalities. Thus, inevitably, their experience of inhabiting the screen was different. The headshot scene, an identical scene for all of them, created a level of self-awareness for all of them: Wayne became aware that someone would eventually watch the scene; Steve placed himself in an empty state of mind, but as the seconds rolled on he became self-conscious; Rhiannon described it as an intense experience. Both Wayne and Steve related to their real-life experiences during some of the scenes: Wayne related to his fictional niece and nephew as a real-life uncle; Steve used his experience of diffusing hostile situations by making himself physically smaller. Steve and Rhiannon mentioned genuine reactions to the scenes: Steve feeling ostracised as he was trying to cut into a conversation in his final scene and Rhiannon experiencing being looked up and down by her new colleagues. Wayne inhabited the character to such a degree that he imagined how the character's relationships manifested themselves outside of the script: by inventing a glance with his fictional brother-in-law and improvising the hallway scene with Sophie. Wayne dealt with having an inexperienced cast by trying to make them relax by doing something funny. Steve felt frustrated by their lack of experience and that they directed their hostility towards him. Some of the scenes, which were framed within one wide-screen frame, were more challenging, left little to hide and needed to be carefully choreographed, for example, Wayne's buffet scene, Steve entering the bar and Rhiannon's staff room scene. Wayne and Rhiannon experienced the chronological jumps that out-of-sequence shooting entails very

differently; Wayne compared it to our non-linear experience of time, that we experience past, present and future all mixed up; Rhiannon, who had mostly worked chronological on stage, felt a sense of dislocation at not having experienced the journey with the character.

The purpose of this chapter was to unpeel the real experience of inhabiting the screen. Asking each actor to recollect and reflect upon the experience, after the fact, has presented me with valuable insights into the intricacies of film set dynamics and in particular the director/actor relationship. This exercise has also been an opportunity for me to reflect on my strengths and shortcomings as a director. As a result of this, it has provided me with a record of the experience of inhabiting *Rules of Engagement* from the other side of the lens, reversing the film, turning it inside out.

### **5.7 Collaboration with Actors**

*Rules of Engagement* required a co-creative approach between director and actor, which differed significantly from previous projects with actors. In past projects I have asked actors to interpret a character based on a script; with *Rules of Engagement* I asked the actors to create a character, one based on a real-life account, and to merge this character with themselves and their own experiences. During the pre-production phase, I had several meetings with each of the principal actors where we discussed the real-life characters and the actor's experiences that related to the story. Instead of sharing the screenplay, we discussed each scene in detail; I did not want to stifle the actors' creativity by tying them down to a script.

On set, I stepped back and let the actors inhabit the screen – to give them space with their character. I avoided giving notes between takes in order to allow the actors to immerse themselves into the scene, and to allow for the unexpected to happen. However, this approach is not always possible and, inevitably, some scenes required more handholding or firmer direction. Recording the actors' experiences on set has contributed to an increased understanding of the space required for this collaboration and co-creation of character to be successful.

## 5.8 The Fractured Process of Filmmaking

For this recollection I sought only to capture the memory of the *internal* experience of inhabiting the screen in *Rules of Engagement*, not to create a behind-the-scene account of the film set dynamics and personal politics around it. What is of crucial interest to this research is how non-linear shooting and multiple takes can be explored as a way of blurring the line between representation and the real. Non-linear shooting, which was brought up in the recollections above, is a process of taking screenplays apart for the practical purpose of economic filming. Does this practical aspect of the filmmaking contribute to a blurred line between representation and the real? For example, in writing about screen acting, Leigh Woods suggests: *"It has often been claimed or assumed, at least in academic circles, that any credit for the poststructuralist and postmodernist outlook should go directly to the theorists, or occasionally creative writers, who have given those movements shape in writing. We think that equal credit at least is due to film actors, who, in considering the disjointed qualities of filmmaking, have offered repeated testimonies to the mechanisation, discontinuity, and lack of communication now widely understood to plague modern life."*<sup>185</sup>

François Truffaut's *Day for Night*<sup>186</sup> a fiction film set on a film set during the filming of a fictional film, plays with the idea of the fractured process of narrative filmmaking by placing the film inside the making of another film. The film reflects upon its on process and this self-reflexivity become most evident in a scene between senior actor, Alexandre (played by Jean-Pierre Aumont) and young star, Julie (played by Jacqueline Bisset). In this scene, Alexandre discusses Julie's mother whom he had previously worked with (a fictional character that never features in the film): *"She hated the way we shoot movies in bits and pieces [...] When the film ended she sat there, then turned to me and said: 'I did all that? All I remember is the waiting.'"*

A more recent and very different example of films that exploit the fractious process of narrative filmmaking is Kitty Green's *Casting of JonBenet*.<sup>187</sup> The film takes the

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<sup>185</sup> Woods in Cadullo, *Playing To The Camera – Film Actors Discuss Their Craft*. (1998), pp. 12.

<sup>186</sup> *Day for Night* (La Nuit Américaine), Dir. François Truffaut's, BFI Films, 1973.

<sup>187</sup> *Casting JonBenet*, Dir. Kitty Green, Netflix UK, 2017.

unresolved murder of JonBenet Ramsay<sup>188</sup> as a starting point to explore the community it left behind. The film plays out around a fictitious re-enactment of the murder, but instead of creating a re-enactment, the film records testimony from the multiple local actors auditioning for the various part of the story. The actors are placed inside replica sets of the environments where the real story played out. Each actor, who is auditioning, re-tells his or her theories of the murder, some veering into a conspiracy. The filmed testimony of similar-looking actors, dressed in similar clothes, telling similar stories, become akin to individual takes of the same scene; however, instead of selecting and refiguring/re-ordering the takes, Green presents all the takes one after the other, to represent a community that never discovered the truth.

## 5.9 Summary

*Rules of Engagement* does not expose the actors' real experiences in front of the camera; if it did it would fail at telling the story it set out to do. However, in capturing testimonies of the experience of inhabiting the work, I have unravelled the experience of inhabiting the screen. In asking how filmmaking can be used to further complicate the blurred boundary between reality and fiction, I have extended the question to acting. Is conventional live-action filmmaking itself intermixed with reality in the sense that it records a set of realities? On the one hand, an actor immersed in character and story and on the other, the necessary responses to the actualities of a film set and the fractured process of filmmaking?

The process of gathering recollections from Wayne, Steve and Rhiannon have led me to reconsider my role as director and the value of the acting craft. This 'light-bulb' moment has influenced my thinking on the direction of the work and has opened up the door to thinking around a new type of collaboration with actors in future projects. For example for my next project, *Breathing Space* (working title) I am looking to employ role-play, rather than scripted scenes as part of the filming process and thereby, will be effectively involving the cast in the development of characters and composition of the work.

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<sup>188</sup> JonBenet Ramsay was murdered, at the age of 6, in her home in Colorado in 1996. The murder was never solved.

The next Chapter *Notes* will capture the editing process through a fictionalised conversation. The chapter is based on verbal and written editing notes given to me during the 6-month editing period.

## Chapter 6: Notes

The editing process sits between the filmed material and the finished film. The process is an invisible part of filmmaking, in the sense that if it is well executed, the audience should not notice the work of the editor. Therefore I have chosen to examine the process through a fictional conversation set in the editing suite, based on actual verbal and written notes received from peers and colleagues during the six-month editing period of *Rules of Engagement*. This semi-fictional approach further echoes the structure of the film work itself and attempts to provide a direct critical context for any reading of it. This chapter also seeks to explore and question of how editing can contribute to (as well as further complicate) the fluctuating border between everyday experience and its screen-based representations.

When it came to editing *Rules of Engagement*, I decided not to work with an external editor, as in previous projects. I chose to do this in order to examine and interrogate more closely this crucial part of the filmmaking process. Editing *Rules of Engagement* was not an entirely solitary process as I continually invited feedback, deliberately choosing to show the work to people with fresh eyes on the project at strategic stages of the editing work.

### 6.1 Notes

INT. CULTURE LAB, EDIT SUITE 7

Pristine editing suite, a giant screen on the wall is showing a rough cut of *Rules of Engagement*.

JOHN sits by the editing table. He seems uncomfortable in his chair. CECILIA is sat at the back of the room, watching JOHN watching the film. She makes notes every time JOHN moves or takes his eyes off the screen.

The film ends.

CECILIA walks up to JOHN and sits down next to him.

The room is silent for a beat.

JOHN

How long have you been editing this?

CECILIA

On and off for six weeks, this is the second completed cut.

JOHN

How do you feel about it?

CECILIA

There's a lot more to do, but all the components are there.

JOHN

That might be part of the problem. I am not sure what you are trying to achieve here.

CECILIA

The intention is to make the audience feel they are watching something they are familiar with through the use of classical continuity editing, but introducing ambiguity by stripping it of some elements associated with fictional drama like the dialogue.

CECILIA fidgets in her chair.

JOHN

Then the job here is to set up and organise the structure, and it is about the rhythm and tempo. At the moment it feels unorganised and not deliberately ambiguous.

CECILIA

For me, editing is about deciding what to include or exclude, these decisions will determine how the audience will experience the film, going beyond the conceptual realms of the work.

JOHN

But you also have the history of filmmaking to compete with.

CECILIA

True, and I work with filmic conventions to find ways of subverting them.



JOHN

You need to find the right tone, but I think it can be all solved in the edit. At the moment, I feel I'm left with unanswered questions.

CECILIA

Like?

JOHN

Why are your setups so stylised? The action is stilted and exaggerated. I'm unsure if this is deliberate or not?

CECILIA

Conventional narrative structures are very efficient in the way they don't allow the audience to be distracted,<sup>189</sup> by utilising these taken-for-granted, real-life stories and heightening them they become strange; a device used to make the audience more aware.<sup>190</sup>

JOHN

Some moments are perfectly deadpan; I can see the influence of the likes of Aki Kaurusmäki, Roy Andersson or Jim Jarmusch. But then, some performances just come across as amateurish.

CECILIA

Which performances?

JOHN

What if we look over the film again?

Cecilia nods.

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<sup>189</sup> This is not in contradictory to Walter Benjamin's idea on how cinema, as part of mass entertainment creates a state of distraction; a viewer absorbed in the work, he writes *"Film pushes back cult value not only by persuading the audience to adopt an appraising stance but also by ensuring that this appraising stance in the cinema does not include attentiveness. The audience is an examiner, but a distracted one"* Walter Benjamin, *The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction*, J.A. Underwood, (trans). (London: Penguin Books, 2008), p. 35.

<sup>190</sup> This idea relates to Brecht's idea of alienation in theatre, he wrote: *"Before familiarity can turn into awareness the familiar must be stripped of its inconspicuousness we must give up assuming that the object in question needs no explanation."* Brecht in Brecht & Willet (ed.), *Brecht on Theatre: the development of an aesthetic* (London : Eyre Methuen, 1978) pp. 144.

JOHN scrolls to the beginning of the film.

NADIA's vignette starts.

JOHN

The duration of these portraits are crucial, the longer I watch them, the more effect they have.

CECILIA

I want the viewer to feel their presence; the portrait establishes each lead character while temporarily suspending the narrative. I want them to negotiate the same physical and emotional space and to bring the stories together.

John nods.

The scene where NADIA gets inducted into the gowning process starts.

JOHN

This scene is a bit long; I'm not sure why I am watching these women get dressed?

CECILIA

I wanted to create a sense of real-time action, to get a sense of the working environment, the high stakes.

JOHN

The scene is too long and procedural.

The film gets to the staff room scene with NADIA and her colleagues.

JOHN

This feels like the most recognisable scene of the whole film. It's full of direct reactions, building dramatic response in the film. This long single take is brilliant.

CECILIA

Thanks.

The film gets to the scene when NADIA is watching something on her laptop.

JOHN

What about these re-occurring sections featuring screens showing a glimpse of the other vignette?

CECILIA

I wanted there to be a moment in the film where the audience becomes aware of the artifice, conscious that they are watching a fictional drama.

JOHN

You've created a window into the other worlds, little fictions within the fictions, connecting the vignettes through the act of watching.

The second vignette featuring ROBIN starts. JOHN fidgets in his seat.

JOHN

I don't get the collar.

CECILIA

Why?

JOHN

It makes me a bit uncomfortable.

CECILIA

Because the actor is mixed-race?

JOHN nods.

CECILIA

Originally the story was about a 'Munch', a casual BDSM daytime get-together and a character that stands out from the other party-goers. But the bondage paraphernalia is also used outside of that scene, especially in popular culture like with Rihanna and Madonna or further back with the punk movement. This is a socially awkward character that is trying to look tough.

JOHN

I don't get the BDSM reference at all.

CECILIA

As there is no dialogue or voice-over to give further context, much of this will be lost. There are only a few BDSM references left in the film. I think only someone with direct experience of this world would pick up the subtle hints. What's important about the story is that it is a group who have come together because of shared interest. This group has their own set of rules, and ROBIN doesn't yet understand these rules.

On screen, ROBIN enters the bar for the first time and mistakes a woman with pink hair as part of the party he is joining.

JOHN

I am unconvinced by the acting; the rhythm is wrong.

CECILIA

The encounter is hard to edit. This was Steve's [who played ROBIN] first scene; he was nervous and was struggling to get into character. The scene was riding on the first wide setup and in it there was nowhere for him to hide. I couldn't get him to relax enough to navigate the space. In hindsight, it was my mistake to schedule such a big setup first.

JOHN

You are going to have to find a way of making the best of what you've got, use editing to erase the mistakes you've made.

On screen, ROBIN goes up to the bartender to order a drink. In the background a screen showing a snippet of NADIA's vignette.

JOHN

How did you choose what clips to include in the screens?

CECILIA

I wanted the screens to show an illusion of the other characters being included; NADIA getting accepted by her colleagues, ROBIN sitting down at a table with people, JACK hugging his dad.

JOHN nods in agreement.

Cecilia smiles.

JOHN

The tension between the men at the bar is brilliant, especially the two guys in the back.

CECILIA

They were real punters who were curious about the filming and were more than happy to be extras. I enjoy working with 'improvised' extras, they haven't had a chance to mentally prepare to be on set, they just happened to be in the right place at the right time, doing what they would normally do in front of the camera. It adds a very small layer of authenticity to the scene.

JOHN

Do you have a close-up of them?

CECILIA

(sigh)

No, unfortunately, we didn't have time to shoot close-ups.

The toilet scene starts; ROBIN looks himself in the mirror.

JOHN

You aware that he is looking into the camera there? Was that a mistake?

CECILIA

He wasn't aware the camera was rolling at that point. Him addressing the camera, although accidentally activates that all-important fourth wall<sup>191</sup>, which was forced open during the

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<sup>191</sup> The fourth wall was key concept in Bertolt Brecht's writing about theatre, he first mentioned it in an article about Chinese theatre techniques where the fourth wall, the

opening portraits, connecting the spectator with the character. To me that instant moment, which coincidentally occurs halfway through the film, is a subtle reminder of the enquiry of the project as a whole, the inversion of real reality and screen reality.

JOHN

Or is it just bad acting?

CECILIA ignores JOHN's comment.

The final scene of ROBIN's vignette starts.

JOHN inhales; CECILIA interrupts before he has a chance to speak.

CECILIA

This scene is tricky to edit as it contains several actions: ROBIN trying to cut into the women's conversation, the woman catching up to ROBIN and his reaction to being handed the flyer.

JOHN

The main issue here is to make him look surprised, which means you probably need to cut this shorter, while making sure every action registers with an audience.

Wayne's vignette starts.

JOHN

He, [Wayne] has got so much awkward tension that he always seems a little out of place or uneasy about something.

The vignette starts with an interior shot. It is very silent.

CECILIA

I am going to add diegetic sound to this bit, the off-screen sound of someone cleaning the house.

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invisible (fourth) wall between the stage and audience was broken and by that making the spectator 'seen'. Bertolt Brecht, 'Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting' in Brecht & Willet *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetics*. (London: Eyre Methuen 1978), pp. 91-99.

JOHN

Great, that will add meaning and context to this shot.

The hallway scene starts; JACK's parents enter the hallway.

JOHN

I don't understand the family dynamic here. Suddenly the story focuses on the woman in the house, not JACK.

CECILIA

I wanted to introduce the other characters in the house, but maybe I need to refocus on JACK.

JACK walks around the living room and greets everyone in the room, then sits down next to his brother-in-law. The brother-in-law shows him something on his phone.

JOHN

There is something comedic about this vignette that is lost in the others; this scene is quite funny! You need to consider how to address this imbalance.

The film cuts to JACK and his family watching TV, in the background JACK's sister and mother are preparing a birthday cake.

JOHN

I like that you keep the action in the kitchen out of focus, it goes on for some time but still keeps me engaged.

CECILIA

The lighter wasn't working correctly that's why the take took so long. It accidentally gave the scene its micro-drama that played out in real-time.

The film cuts to the kitchen; JACK enters the kitchen while 'Happy Birthday' is sung in the other room.

JOHN

I'm not sure about this scene; the inclusion of voice is a bit weird after all this silence.

CECILIA

On paper, the singing worked fine, but I agree; it does jump out.

The final scene with JACK and his sister in the hallway begins.

JOHN

The final scene is good. I especially liked the woman, his ex-wife.

CECILIA

She is his sister in the script, but you are not the first one who has said they think she is his ex-wife, and I suppose it doesn't matter.

The film finishes. JOHN and CECILIA sit in silence for a while.

JOHN

Who is your audience? Did you mention something about cinema screenings next year?

CECILIA

The film is going to be screened in both gallery and cinema venues. I am interested in how the audience will respond to this film and if the response will be different from an audience expecting a short film or an art audience.

JOHN

I think there is a clear link between the real and representation of the everyday in your work, but then I think we all tend to view ourselves in filmic terms, however limited the types of narratives that represent 'real' life, but you are right; the reading of the work will be different based on what the audiences are expecting to see. What happens for example if you apply a feminist reading to the work?



CECILIA

I think that would be interesting; feminist theory has traditionally been concerned with the politics of everyday life.<sup>192</sup>

Both go quiet.

CECILIA

Any final notes?

JOHN

The biggest question is going to be: Why is the film stripped of dialogue?

CECILIA

It comes back to the intention of the work; to create something that looks familiar but at closer inspection isn't. Dialogue and speech are what you would expect in a narrative drama. The lack of dialogue also highlights non-verbal communication that unwritten social protocols rely on, which is the thematic exploration of the work.

JOHN

It's awfully quiet though, which does drag out the duration quite a bit.

CECILIA

It needs to be dragged out for the audience to realise what is missing. I wanted to work with the senses, to let the viewer experience the three scenarios, not be told about them; voice-over, dialogue and text can so easily take you away from the possibility of sensory reactions offered up by the moving image.

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<sup>192</sup> The slogan 'personal is political' (which is also the title of an essay by Carol Hanisch although she herself has declined authorship of the political slogan) and the second wave feminist movement in the late 1960s, brought to attention the connection between the personal and social structures challenging traditional family values. And as later expressed by Carol Pateman: "*The dichotomy between the private and the public is central to almost two centuries of feminist writing and political struggle; it is, ultimately, what the feminist movement is about*" 'Feminist Critiques of the Public/Private Dichotomy' in *The Disorder of Women. Democracy, Feminism and Political Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989) p. 118.

JOHN

What will you do with the sound? Will there be a soundtrack?

CECILIA

The intention is to exaggerate the silence as well as smoothing out any disjuncture of the edit to achieve continuity. I want to heighten the uncomfortable moments, for example, eating sounds or the rustling of clothes, making the scenarios more oppressive. I will add music to the narratives unfolding on the physical screens placed in each narrative; this will place them in a fictional world with non-diegetic sounds while the rest of the film only has diegetic sound environments.

John's phone beeps, he looks at it.

JOHN

I need to go.

CECILIA

This has been great, given me a lot of things to think about.

John gets up to leave.

JOHN

It's an interesting comment on three very different social situations, where a person has to engage or interact with others, who are all trying hard but not having much luck. But I need some backstory. The intention behind the work is vague, if it is ambiguity you want then you need to tease that out. This needs to be answered in the work. It is difficult to get excited about something so banal.

CECILIA

It is supposed to be banal and it IS focusing on the insignificant, and by doing that there is a questioning involved in how the moving images accurately describe an event. The lack of narrative convention should be felt not thought about.

JOHN

You still have got some convincing to do. But I think you can make a good film out of this. I really need to go now. Bye then.

CECILIA

Bye.

JOHN leaves the suite. CECILIA turns around and looks at the screen; a still image, a close up of NADIA's face is staring back at her.

## 6.2 Finalising the Edit

The initial feedback that I received was mostly concerned with the intent of the work, on pacing, duration and the lack of dialogue. The removal of dialogue needed to feel intentional but I did not want it to make the film feel too long. To address these overarching problems I worked at length to tighten the edit, cut out where necessary, achieving a sense of continuity and flow within and between scenes without losing the requisite level of ambiguity.

One notable change from the screenplay to finished film was the re-ordering of vignettes. The original order of the vignette in the screenplay was NADIA, ROBIN and JACK. The re-ordering change came about as a result of an accident; I edited the three vignettes separately initially and then, during a studio visit halfway through the edit, I accidentally showed JACK's vignette first and NADIA's last. That made me realise that JACK's vignette, which takes place in the most recognisable environment - a home, worked best to start the film with.

## 6.3 Sound Design

Editing is assembling a story with moving images, whereas sound design is about helping the audience both feel and comprehend that story. Together they come together as a whole. The *audio-visual contract*, an idea brought forward in Michael Chion's *Audio Vision – Sound on Screen*<sup>193</sup>, offers a theory of how audio and visuals in cinema often do different things but together contributes to a whole. For example, how certain events on

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<sup>193</sup> Michel Chion, *Audio Vision – Sound on Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994)

screen - such as falls or blows – only take on consistency and materiality through the addition of sound.<sup>194</sup>

Musician and sound designer Ziad Jabero did an initial sound mix of the final cut of the film before we began working collaboratively in the sound studio together. This approach allowed him to thoroughly familiarise himself with the project at a relatively late stage in the production process.

Making the lack of speech and the awkwardness of the situations more apparent we decided to heighten certain sounds such as the rustling of clothes, coughs and sighs. An undertone for each environment was created to give each vignette a distinct feel. To highlight the screen-in-screen moments, we came up with the idea of creating a reoccurring melodic score that would create a reveal and again complicate the blurring of realities.<sup>195</sup>

Of all the collaborative processes involved in filmmaking it is, in my opinion, the work between director/editor (the person/s in charge of the image and cut) and sound designer that require a fully integrated co-creative approach to build a sound design that both adds information and creates moods to achieving the optimum interplay between image and sound.

## **6.4 Transforming Rushes to Film**

It is difficult to contextualise other practices in this chapter as the editing process is most often undocumented and not part of the finished work. However, I have considered and examined some of the methods I used to edit *Rules of Engagement* that complicate the boundary between the real and the fictional and contextualised works in each relevant category.

### **6.4.1 *Breaking the fourth wall***

The portraits at the start of each vignette were initially a way to introduce each character to the audience, but through the editing process, I realised how this direct address contributes to the research itself. Aesthetically the portraits referenced Andy

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>195</sup> See 6.4.3 *The reveal* further down this chapter for more detail.

Warhol's *Screen Tests*<sup>196</sup>, a series of black and white, silent screen portraits. The subjects of Warhol's films were instructed to keep still appearing as much like photographs as possible.<sup>197</sup> The portraits were projected back and slowed down, thereby placing them between a still and a moving image.

Within fiction film, the common injunction is that actors should never directly address the camera. However, this very technique has been used as a trope, deliberately breaking from convention, inevitably adding meaning, whether as an instruction, a comical device or adding a layer of documentary authenticity to the story.<sup>198</sup> In Godard's *Pierrot Le Fou*<sup>199</sup>, the characters address the camera both directly and indirectly, thereby reminding the audience that the characters themselves are aware that they are in a fictional film. Max, played by Woody Allen in *Annie Hall*<sup>200</sup>, breaks out of a cinema queue to vent his frustrations to the audience about a person standing behind him. Tyler Durden, the main character in *Fight Club*<sup>201</sup> narrates directly to the camera on several occasions throughout the film. More recently in *I, Tonya*<sup>202</sup>, a film based on contradictory accounts of shamed ice-skater Tonya Harding, the characters occasionally address the camera.

According to Peter Wollen, *estrangement* was one of the key strategies used by Godard and the counter-cinema movement to subvert classic Hollywood narrative cinema.<sup>203</sup> *Estrangement* can be achieved on screen through direct address and, according to Wollen, functions as a way to break the audience's emotional attachment to the fictional character thereby creating a critical distance. Wollen attributes this strategy to Brecht and his concept of 'verfremdungseffekt'.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> *Screen Tests*, Andy Warhol, (1964-66)

<sup>197</sup> Douglas Crimp, "Our Kind of Movie" *The Films of Andy Warhol* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2012), p. 8.

<sup>198</sup> Don Fairservice, *Film editing: history, theory and practice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001) pp. 308.

<sup>199</sup> *Pierrot Le Fou*, Dir. Jean-Luc Goddard, BFI Distributon, 1965.

<sup>200</sup> *Annie Hall*, Dir. Woody Allen, United Artists, 1977.

<sup>201</sup> *Fight Club*, Dir. David Fincher, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1999.

<sup>202</sup> *I, Tonya*, Dir. Craig Gillespie, Entertainment One UK, 2017.

<sup>203</sup> Peter Wollen, 'Godard and the Counter Cinema' in Rosen, P (ed.) *Narrative Apparatus, Ideology – A Film Theory Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 120-129.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, p.122.

The portraits in *Rules of Engagement* do achieve a similar *estrangement*, and although this does create a critical distance, I do not necessarily concur with Wollen in that it breaks the audience's emotional engagement with the character. In my opinion, direct address to camera, employed in *Rules of Engagement*, strips the actor bare creating an intimate space between spectator and viewer, a space that exists in between the real and representation.

#### **6.4.2 'Real' time and duration**

Beyond the direct address, the portraits further provide the film with a real-time durational performance. Initially the portraits would last for about 10-20 seconds; in the end, they were held for 40 seconds. The narrative sections in *Rules of Engagement* employ traditional continuity editing, a style "*which enables a story to be narrated with the least possible disruption and disorientation to the viewer*".<sup>205</sup> Each scene was shot as static wide shot complemented by alternative shots from selected angles and distances. This approach allowed me to keep the scenes as one single continuous take. My aim in the edit was to cut into the wide shots as little as possible without losing a sense of familiarity with the narrative constructs that I had initially re-appropriated. I deliberately held onto shots for longer than I would have if I had wanted to create a more conventional drama. The longest held shot in the film is 1 minute and 50 seconds; this is the penultimate scene in the film and takes place in the canteen where NADIA is attempting to join into her colleagues' coffee break. The shot stood out from the rest of the drama in terms of duration and formed part of my reasoning for moving the scene to the end the film, instead of in the middle of NADIA's vignette as initially intended.

For me it was essential to tease the duration out of every single shot and to find the balance with the idea of narrative continuity; firstly, as the uninterrupted cut brings a sense of real-time and secondly, the lack of cuts brings attention to the image itself, creating a certain dissonance by not cutting where it would be expected. Andre Bazin wrote about the development of cinematic language and categorised two kinds of filmmakers: those who relied on the image itself and those who employed montage to impose an interpretation with an audience, meaning that some filmmakers were able to

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<sup>205</sup> Valerie Oprea, *Film Editing. The Art of The Expressive*, (2003), pp. 16.

trust in the image itself while others relied on the combination of moving images.<sup>206</sup> The long uninterrupted take brings ‘temporal reality’, which in turn brings out the ‘ambiguity of reality’.<sup>207</sup>

Chantal Akerman’s *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*<sup>208</sup> is a 3 hour and 45 minutes-long film that follows Jeanne, a single parent who prostitutes herself to cover her subsistence. The film is set over three days and portrays Jeanne’s daily routine, including the sex acts with clients. It is uneventful in a traditional sense and depicted with a static camera. The film does reach a dramatic climax when Jeanne, at the end of the third day, murders one of her clients; but it is the sense of watching something unfolding in real time that transports the film into the realm of the hyper-real.<sup>209</sup> Akerman was not the first filmmaker to use long static takes, but it is in the depiction of the mundane and insignificant domestic activities that this work draws attention to the medium of narrative filmmaking itself. By documenting events that are not often considered dramatic enough to feature on the big screen, these real and mundane events become elevated, intertwining reality with representation right before our eyes.

The events depicted in *Rules of Engagement* are arguably more ‘exciting’ than the everyday routines of Jeanne Dielman; however, like Akerman’s film, it attempts to create a real but strange space, through the use of long takes, whilst adhering to the conventions of continuity editing.

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<sup>206</sup> It is important to distinguish between editing and montage here, as all films are edited and montage is a technique of bringing images together and in their synthesised state they create meaning as a whole.

<sup>207</sup> See André Bazin, ‘The Evolution of the Language of Cinema’ in Bazin and Gray (ed) *What is Cinema? Volume 2* (London: University of California Press, 2005, first published 1967), pp. 23 – 40.

<sup>208</sup> *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*, Dir Chantal Akerman, The Criterion Collection, 1975.

<sup>209</sup> This is very much a central theme in Ivone Margulies book *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman’s Hyperrealist Everyday*, through the focus of on the real-time representation of a woman’s everyday experience. Margulies defines Akerman’s work as ‘corporeal’ cinema and contextualizes her work through Warhol and American experimental avant-garde film as well as European modernist cinema of the likes of Bresson and Dreyer. Ivone Margulies, *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman’s Hyperrealist Everyday* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

### 6.4.3 The reveal

Every narrative scene consists of a series of reveals: new information given to the audience that drives the story forward. The timing of the reveal is crucial and perfected in the edit. A crucial moment of reveal in *Rules of Engagement* is the scene where JACK and his family are gathered in front of the TV watching ROBIN's story. I began the scene with the shot revealing the TV screen and then cut to the shot with the family watching the screen. I wanted to delay the reveal of ROBIN's narrative by focusing first of all on the family watching the screen; however, the image alone didn't explain that the family was watching television clearly enough. This led me to add a subtle musical score indicating TV sound. Later the audience re-lives the same moment in ROBIN's vignette but this time without the musical score. I also added a musical score, a variation of the same score, to the subsequent reveals of NADIA on the screen in the pub in ROBIN's vignette and JACK on NADIA's laptop screen. The score is then repeated for the title credits at the end of the film.

The reveal can be used as a device to expose the artifice of narrative drama - for example in Sarah Polley's *Stories We Tell*.<sup>210</sup> The film retraces the life of Diane Polley - the filmmaker's mother. The film starts as a seemingly straightforward documentary narrated through interviews with Polley's relatives and friends, intermixed with archive super8 family footage. As the complex story of Diane unfolds, discrepancies between accounts surface, and it becomes clear that the archive footage is re-staged. For the final part of the film, the footage that posed as family footage becomes documentary reconstruction. Polley plays with the audience familiarity with Super8 home movie footage as well as documentary re-enactment, and by doing so, she questions the authenticity of moving image footage, narrative recollection and documentary conventions. By revealing the artificiality of Polley's Super8 'home' footage, the audience is placed in a state of disbelief where neither fiction nor fact entirely prevails.

Another example of revealing the artifice is Phillip Warnell's *Ming of Harlem*<sup>211</sup>, although his film presents its narrative more ambiguously. Warnell's film is the stranger-than-fiction story of Antoine Yates who was caught keeping Ming, a tiger, in a Harlem high-rise. The film starts with Yates reminiscing about his life in Harlem through the course of

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<sup>210</sup> *Stories We Tell*, Sarah Polley, Artificial Eye Co Ltd. 2012.

<sup>211</sup> *Ming of Harlem*, Phillip Warnell, Soda Pictures Ltd, 2016.



a taxi ride. Gradually we are taken into the high-rise in Harlem where he lived and, suddenly we are in the flat where he kept Ming, and just as suddenly, the tiger itself appears.<sup>212</sup> For nearly 20 minutes, without voice-over or info-graphics, we follow the tiger in the flat, and slowly but surely, through tiny clues such as the set-like quality of the interior, the flat is revealed as a set built inside a zoo. The sound design and occasional cutaways to the real apartment block in Harlem keep the audience in a state of disbelief. It is not until the end credits that the full set structure reveals itself and the audience finally knows for sure.

*Ming of Harlem* and *Stories We Tell* are hybrid documentaries that operate between factual and fictional storytelling; they use 'reveal' in the edit to question the audience's belief in moving image footage. *Rules of Engagement* does not contain a big dramatic reveal as in the above mentioned-projects; however, it does reveal a different storytelling mode through the use of diegetic and non-diegetic sound design in the scenes featuring screens. The inclusion of a musical underscore, a decision that came out of the sound design process, placed the narratives on the screen at a distinct fictional space; the music created a mood, which gave the moving images another layer of meaning. The screens connected the three stories through the act of watching, revealing another layer of in the intricate entanglement of reality and representation.

## 6.5 Summary

Editing is storytelling with images and sound. To study the art of storytelling, David Bordwell<sup>213</sup> lays out three strategies, which all can be considered a guide to the editing process. Firstly, storytelling as representation, by looking at the story world and its relation to reality. Secondly, storytelling as a structure, by looking at the parts of the story that make a whole; focusing on the narrative structures and the narrative 'grammar' of the story. The third and final strategy is to look at storytelling as a process, and the activity of selecting and arranging the material to achieve a time-bound effect on the viewer. The placement and use of reveal is key to this approach.

These strategies were useful tools to have to hand during the editing process and to measure against the intentions of the work. For example, looking at the film's

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<sup>212</sup> In the film played by a tiger named 'Rajiu' residing at Isle of Wright Zoo.

<sup>213</sup> David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (London: Routledge, 1986), p. xi.

relationship to reality by finding the right balance between the long real-time portraits and more traditional continuity editing in the rest of the film; or looking at the narrative 'grammar' and how it effectively tells the story whilst subtly subverting audience expectations by breaking conventions; or scrutinising the sequences and placement of new information to create the desired time-bound effect on the audience.

The editing process deals with three realities at the same time: the reality of the material captured, the reality of the edit suite at hand, and the film the audience will eventually be shown in the future. As a finished film, *Rules of Engagement* does not reveal its discarded scenes and unused takes; therefore for this chapter, I wanted to offer a window into the editing phase using a fictional conversation, based on the actual feedback, to represent the process of how *Rules of Engagement* took its final shape.

The next chapter *Questions & Answers* will explore *Rules of Engagement's* first public outings and its first contact with an audience.

## Chapter 7: Questions & Answers

In previous chapters, I have uncovered and untangled the complex relationship between filmmaking and reality, by dissecting each part of the process behind conceiving and making *Rules of Engagement*, and by positioning each step against relevant screen-based practices. At this point, I was interested in critically exploring how *Rules of Engagement* – as a final finished entity, itself contributes to the question by putting it in front of an audience.

### 7.1 The Venues and Screening Format

*Rules of Engagement* screened to the public at a series of events across cinema and art venues in the UK from January 31st to February 15th 2018. The events were free, and they were advertised in the local press, printed and online. Producer Gerry Maguire briefly introduced each event, followed by the screening of the films and finishing off with an in-conversation event. The screenings were each hosted by an invited speaker; it was important that the speakers all hailed from a diversity of backgrounds - from film programming to curating, and consequently offered an opportunity to approach the work from different perspectives. Each session centred on a theme/question relating directly to the broader implications of my practice as well as *Rules of Engagement*. The screening venues and places were carefully selected; it was essential to find a combination of venues that would draw a different kind of audience - and by that a mixed engagement with the work. For example, the audience at Regent Street Cinema mostly consisted of students, the audience at CCA in Glasgow was mainly an art-going audience, while at the Maltings in Berwick upon Tweed, the audience were residents with an interest in theatre and film.

*Rules of Engagement* was financed on the back of this tour of screenings and for that purpose the film had to work as a stand-alone single screen work. The screening format was also suitable for the intention of the work - to convey the experience of ill-fitting invisible social protocols, by adhering to conventions of cinema (with characters and a linear narrative structure) to achieve an emotional connection and imaginative identification between spectator and film. The idea of imaginative identification – where

the spectator imagines being in the character's situation – ties in with the central thesis of my work, namely the intertwining between reality and fiction.<sup>214</sup>

The purpose of these Q&A sessions and this chapter was to create a space for self-reflexivity. By capturing initial thoughts and responses after screening the work, I was able to consider whether the work ultimately functioned in relation to the questions it had set out to explore. Below are excerpts from transcripts of the Question & Answer sessions that followed each screening.

## 7.2 Screening 1: Regent Street Cinema

This screening centred around the idea of the ordinary on screen; transforming and heightened quotidian reality into a cinematic narrative, the films in these screenings were set in a variety of domestic, public and professional contexts. The screening included the films *How to Choose*<sup>215</sup>, *In Waiting*<sup>216</sup>, *SYSTEM*<sup>217</sup> and *Rules of Engagement*<sup>218</sup>. Philip Ilson, Artistic Director of London Short Film Festival, hosted the Q&A session.

Philip Ilson: *When I saw Rules of Engagement for the first time I was thinking how the scenarios, which are all placed in very recognisable environments, look very composed, almost heightened and removed from reality. And your works are about really mundane everyday situations, but they are very dramatic as well, almost the stuff of soap opera.*

Cecilia: It's important for me to make the audience aware of the artifice; that they are watching a representation of reality. Allowing the audience a possible critical distance. I shoot on locations with existing interiors that I carefully restage and compose, removing them from reality only just enough for it to be noted, it is about making the familiar strange.

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<sup>214</sup> For imaginative identification and character identification see Berys Gaut in Plantinga & Smith (eds.) *Passionate Views Film, Cognition and Emotion* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1999), pp 200-216.

<sup>215</sup> *How to Choose*, Cecilia Stenbom, single screen film, 2012.

<sup>216</sup> *In Waiting*, Cecilia Stenbom, single screen film, 2014.

<sup>217</sup> *SYSTEM*, Cecilia Stenbom, single screen film, 2014.

<sup>218</sup> *Rules of Engagement*, Cecilia Stenbom, single screen film, 2018.

P: *There is a sense of things being awkward or unnatural in the performance, which seem to tie in with the way you visually treat the environments. How did you work with the actors to create those performances?*

C: I always trying to tease an inherent awkwardness in the performances, I've realised that awkwardness is more natural than 'natural' acting. In real life, most of our moments are quite awkward. If I stay back and hold a camera on someone for a long time, this awkwardness will emerge.

P: *And you don't move the camera much?*

C: No, I try and stay clear of that. If you fix the camera, you can let things evolve within the frame, instead of always directing the gaze, by moving the camera around. With a fixed camera, I can't control where the spectator is going to look, and they will start to discover things within the frame for themselves. It comes back to allowing the audience that critical distance.

P: *Place and space are integral to your work and to pick up on what you said how do you come to these bland environments: Your latest film is set in a middle-class home, a pub and laboratory, how did you find these locations?*

C: I am interested in the kind of surroundings we operate in without really reflecting upon. I don't attempt to create a sense of realism; I re-create the image of these spaces. The houses and homes in my films look like interiors out of IKEA catalogues, they don't contain real life, much like television sets. I've included several clinical environments in my films, and I am interested in how these spaces peel away humanity, the laboratory and its inhabitants in *Rules of Engagement* was very much this kind of space. The pub was a generic or simplified version of a real pub. The original accounts gave me ideas of the type of interiors I was looking for as they all, to some extent, contained descriptions of the places. I am interested in production design and the look of films; a lot of narrative drama, in sets or staged locations, is taken for real but they are very corrected and stylised. So what I am doing is stylising these environments, making them even blander than they would be and drawing attention to how constructed they are. By dealing with stories that are about seemingly insignificant everyday dramas I make

connections between screen representations of the real world and reality by mediating what is around us.

Q: (Young woman in audience) *With Rules of Engagement did you present the idea that conformity in society is the only way to create belonging?*

C: I don't think conformity is the answer, right the opposite. The characters, environments and scenarios in my films are quite ordinary, and in a sense they represent conformity. But, for me, it is in these environments where social critique is imperative. I am interested in the construction of identity and human interaction, and I've realised these two doesn't go hand in hand; we only accept certain constructions of identity and shun those who stand out. Therefore we conform to fit in, enabling frictionless social interaction. And this film captures the fallout when conformity fails. And then to connect this to the broader enquiry in the work: does the prevalence of moving image narratives, in our day-to-day life, affect notions of identity and human interaction? Does it create cultural conformity? I can think of a few links made within critical theory between media consumption, cultural conformity and everyday life.<sup>219</sup> How do these moving images get into our heads, why are they so compelling? Is it just as simple as we learn from what we watch, or that it mimics our own ability to play out visual narratives in our mind? But then, does the moving images that surround us, part of popular culture, really promote cultural hegemony? But that's an entirely different exploration.

### 7.3 Screening 2: CCA Glasgow

The focus for this screening was the frequent use of re-appropriation and re-interpretation of screen-based constructs in the work to explore representations of the real vs. reality. The works included all took their starting point from cinema and television and included the works *The Case*<sup>220</sup>, *Parallel*<sup>221</sup>, *How To Choose*<sup>222</sup>, *Rules of Engagement*<sup>223</sup>. The Q&A was hosted by freelance critic and film programmer Harriet Warman.

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<sup>219</sup> See *Chapter 1: Introduction* for examples.

<sup>220</sup> *The Case*, Cecilia Stenbom, single screen film, 2013.

<sup>221</sup> *Parallel*, Cecilia Stenbom, single screen film, 2016.

<sup>222</sup> *How To Choose*, Cecilia Stenbom, single screen film, 2012.

<sup>223</sup> *Rules of Engagement*, Cecilia Stenbom, single screen film, 2018.

Harriet Warman: *You have mentioned before is this idea of source material from film, re-appropriating screen-based constructs, maybe you can tell us a little bit about what the sources were in Rules of Engagement?*

Cecilia: From the very beginning of the process I was interested in exploring the idea of documentary re-construction, as it is a construct that takes real-life testimony and re-creates it as a visual narrative, although most often accompanied by some form of narration. As the scenarios developed I realised that they could allude to a sort of soap opera, a genre which is often played out in interiors centred around conversation; *Rules of Engagement* is about interaction with its dialogue removed. As the script started to take shape, I realised it was a sort of chamber play as well, a paired down drama, with limited locations and characters. What connected these three constructs was that they are all concerned with an everyday version of reality.

H: *And why is it important to you to re-work pre-existing narrative constructs?*

C: I look at the moving image narratives that surround us as part of everyday life and how these narratives become part of us; as our ideas and in our experiences, we muddle our real-life events up with fictional depictions of them. This is of course not unique to the moving image, literature has a similar ability. What I am interested in is taking *real* life and re-interpreted that as moving image narrative, deliberately using or alluding to familiar moving image constructs. These original sources might not appear glaringly apparent to the spectator but should operate as subtle clues.

H: *And by real life you mean the sort of everyday interactions: fears and anxieties?*

C: Exactly, the stuff that contributes to our notions of identity and governs social inclusion/exclusion.

H: *The film [Rules of Engagement] made me think of a book called Watching the English<sup>224</sup>, which is a kind of socio-ethnographic study, and it's about this idea that you only know something is a rule when somebody breaks it?*

C: I am really interested in these kinds of observations of how we police each other and how these social protocols are enforced. They are real rules even if they are invisible and unwritten. I guess going back to the bigger question in my work; do the narratives around us contribute to teaching us these rules? How? When I first moved to the UK my reference points for social interaction were all based on fictional drama set here.

Q: (Audience member) *I have got a question regarding the re-occurring subject matter; social anxiety, and your method; repositioning or re-appropriating an idea of narrative drama. Narrative drama often deals with big dramatic events we don't often get to experience in real life. In your work you take the things, we do get to experience in everyday life and turn that into fiction. Is it that through fiction these social anxieties become something completely different?*

C: My exploration here is into highly mundane and ordinary experiences, which are not usually the centre of a storyline in film or TV-drama. For me, the interest is in elevating these kinds of real and mundane scenarios to form something much more televisual or cinematic. Even in a way, epic. I'm not interested in depicting reality as a realm, but to place or replace it in a heightened universe, and by doing that making it more real, more apparent somehow, magnifying our common social anxieties.

Sam Ainsley: *In your work, there is a sense of things being staged, things being unnatural and not quite right somehow and I wondered, with your Swedish background, is there a sense of Northern-ness that infuses your work?*

C: The ideas are often generated from experiences or feelings I've had and to investigate them further I start by talking to others about their experiences. I have thought a lot lately about national identity. I've been made acutely aware of my Swedish-ness in the past couple of years, since the [EU] referendum. Although living in Gateshead have made

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<sup>224</sup> Kate Fox, *Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2004).



me feel quite isolated I think there are many similarities in Scandinavian and British sensibilities. So in a way, the critique comes from within; we, as Scandinavians and Brits, can't really connect with one another so instead we have these social protocols; I think there is a *Northern* way of interacting. In previous works, I've explored narrative constructs from Scandinavia such as Nordic Noir Crime Drama. The chamber play is common within Scandinavian theatre and cinema.

Q: (Woman in the audience) *I'm interested in your working methods, and I'm interested how do you feel about the audience having an expectation to see that coherence in your work?*

C: One of the key things I want to achieve in the work is to break the audience expectations of what they are consuming on screen, by re-appropriating screen constructs. And if I want to break audience expectations of narrative drama I am not worried about breaking their expectations they might have of *my* work. I suppose the enquiry stays even if the work changes, there are infinite possibilities and so many avenues to explore.

Mick Peter: *I was thinking about how the characters were excluded and inhabited this exclusion; they are all excluded from someone else's party. I am interested to know if this is a real archetype or something you got from a soap, TV drama or film?*

C: The film explores the idea of exclusion, based on real stories, formatted and presented deliberately alluding to the way real life is re-packaged for the cinematic or televisual format. So the scenarios explored in the film are real while the treatment of them deliberately places them in a fictional space. When you strip away a lot of the context, the story will stray from the original account. But then that's the thing with narrative fiction: when we are watching a story unfold on a screen, we are having a genuine experience of it based on how we interpret the story even if that is different from the original story. Your interpretation of the film will be based on your own experiences as well as your familiarity with screen-based drama. Jack who initially told me the story was quite amused when I showed him the film, and he said, *"It's nothing like my family get-togethers"*. But then that doesn't really matter anymore to this project.

### 7.4 Screening 3: Tyneside Cinema

This screening looked into the use of real-life testimony as source material, the screening included films *The Case*<sup>225</sup>, *In Waiting*<sup>226</sup>, *REMAKE*<sup>227</sup>, *SYSTEM*<sup>228</sup> and *Rules of Engagement*<sup>229</sup>, these films were all based on collected accounts. The Q&A session was hosted by film critic Michael Pattison.

Michael Pattison: *The process behind these films, working with direct testimony as your source material, is it very similar or does it vary from project to project?*

C: I am interested in storytelling as part of everyday life; how we tell and re-tell, the story of our own lives, and I try to capture these narratives, often verbatim, as a starting point for exploring the concepts within the frameworks I've set up. I have worked with captured accounts, thoughts and narratives, raw and unedited material delivered straight from a source. The method and treatment of the accounts varies and develops from each project. With *The Case* I worked with transcripts from conversations that I turned into dialogue intermixed with familiar scenes from crime fiction. *SYSTEM* was based on a series of interviews with members of the public that I then scripted into a fictional film. *In Waiting* drew upon conversations about dealing with uncertainty. With *REMAKE* I started by asking people to supply me with descriptions of cinematic interiors. With *Rules of Engagement*, I set out to re-create scenarios I had collected, as a sort of documentary reconstruction. What set this film apart was that it came from a much longer research and development period than any of my previous projects.

M: *And how did you source the material [for Rules of Engagement]?*

C: I approached people within my own social networks, I wanted to work with a more informal approach; therefore I opted to search for stories by having conversations with friends rather than sourcing strangers for formal interviews.

M: *Why was that important for this project?*

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<sup>225</sup> *The Case*, Cecilia Stenbom, single screen film, 2013.

<sup>226</sup> *In Waiting*, Cecilia Stenbom, single screen film, 2014.

<sup>227</sup> *REMAKE*, Cecilia Stenbom, single screen film 2016.

<sup>228</sup> *SYSTEM*, Cecilia Stenbom, single screen film, 2014.

<sup>229</sup> *Rules of Engagement*, Cecilia Stenbom, single screen film, 2018.

C: The subject matter required a more relaxed approach; the scenarios grew out of conversations rather than me questioning them. I don't think I would have located these scenarios from complete strangers. I was looking for stories that were less generic and more intimate.

M: *How do you work with actors, to what extent are they involved in the process?*

C: With the casting for *Rules of Engagement* I wanted to approach it differently from previous projects. I didn't do conventional auditions, it was more conversational; not a million mile away from the conversations I had initially recorded. I was looking if they could relate to the characters and encouraged them to bring in as much of their own experience. Their experiences were inserted into the scenarios. I gave them a bit more leeway to put to more of themselves into it.

M: *So it was co-authored with the actors?*

C: Yes, sort of. I did have a script but I let the actors take the story further, and some bits were re-written and emphasise shifted with certain characters.

Q: (Man in audience) *How important to you was it that the accounts are sourced from real life?*

C: I am not using real life as a source; I am using real-life testimony as a source. There is a fundamental distinction here; a recollection of an event is a narrativised account of something that has happened, not a record of things. I use testimony as a jump-off point, not a plan - I didn't seek out to reconstruct events - I re-interpreted them. I used the idea of documentary re-construction when I started narrativising them but without sticking to the notion of documentary truth. Is the approach different from fiction writers who often conduct background research by collecting real-life accounts? I think the crucial difference is that I don't make the scenarios and stories up from scratch I find the situations and then fictionalise them.

M: *To what extent do you feel guided by the research you undertake?*

C: The research is integral to the development and construction of the work. And it takes form in many ways; understanding the theme, contextualising the field around the works, interviews, collecting of references. The work guides the research and without the background research there would be no work. I see it as a process of uncovering rather than creating; the work is already there and it's my job to find out what it is. I don't let the research steer the direction I take. When it comes to decisions, what to include/exclude for example I make those based on gut feeling rather than what I've learned from background research. It's a practice-led process.

M: *Has the PhD process influenced your work?*

C: It has given me the time to re-evaluate and to take everything apart and see if I can put it back together. I've explored the concept of fiction and reality or screen reality and real reality, and more specifically used the process of making *Rules of Engagement* to see how filmmaking itself can complicate and blur the boundary between these two poles. That process has pushed the work forward, and it has allowed me to take it in a more ambiguous direction.

## 7.5 Screening 4: The Maltings

Peter Taylor, artistic director of Berwick Film & Media Arts Festival, hosted the in-conversation session. The screening in Berwick looked at the mixed use of documentary and fiction conventions in the work, this screening included both fictional and documentary works. The screening included: *The Case*<sup>230</sup>, *BEAM REACH BLASTING*<sup>231</sup>, *Parallel*<sup>232</sup> and *Rules of Engagement*<sup>233</sup>.

Peter Taylor: *I was wondering if you can tell us a little bit about all the roads and paths some of the influences that brought you up to this point in your practice as you are an artist, but you've chosen image-making and filmmaking as your medium?*

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<sup>230</sup> *The Case*, Cecilia Stenbom, single screen film, 2013.

<sup>231</sup> *BEAM REACH BLASTING*, Cecilia Stenbom & Chris Sharkey, single screen film, 2017.

<sup>232</sup> *Parallel*, Cecilia Stenbom, single screen film, 2016.

<sup>233</sup> *Rules of Engagement*, Cecilia Stenbom, single screen film, 2018.

Cecilia: I have worked with moving image since art school, and in a way, my work has always been about cinema, popular culture and television, especially narrative drama. But it was only about 6 years ago when I got my eyes open to narrative filmmaking with regards to scripting and working with actors and crew; the collaborative nature of working, which suited the work I was making. I always worked with captured material, could be in the form of found images, film, text or transcripts, mixed with the completely made up. The materials I gather go through a sort of mediation or re-interpretation; I work with reality as source while remaining in a fictional space. The influences that have dominated my work has often originated from cinema or narrative moving image installation, works that give a cinematic treatment to the everyday existence and human experience, and this comes back to the idea that the work often centres around; screen reality versus real reality.

P: *Rules of Engagement starts with portraits, and I believed that they were portraying themselves not a role?*

C: Wayne, Rhiannon and Steve did play a character, but we incorporated their own experiences into the film. I didn't want them to take on a role; I wanted them to develop the character from within. The portraits were a way to introduce them as the storyteller so, in a sense they were portraying themselves as they, as performers, were carrying the story.

P: *These situations that are quite universal but you've used real experiences as a basis for the film?*

C: The scenarios emerged from stories about real experiences. Storytelling is part of our construction of identity, and therefore I wanted to use other people's accounts of their experiences as a basis for the film rather than trying to re-create realistic scenarios. In a sense, the documentary elements of the film, the true-life accounts, is as fictional as the parts made up.

P: You mentioned a mixed-used of documentary and fiction conventions. Some of the works BEAM REACH BLASTING<sup>234</sup>, for example, is an experimental documentary in the sense that the footage captures life without doctoring it. Rules of Engagement is produced as a drama, how do you see documentary conventions coming into this project?

C: *Rules of Engagement* is not a documentary in the sense that it seeks to re-represent found reality. It is a film loosely based on found stories that I re-created. Documentary film itself is a tricky thing to define, and it relies on the trust placed in the filmmaker that his/her treatment of the material captured isn't manipulating the truth.<sup>235</sup> Thematically I looked at documentary re-enactment, which is a device used in documentary filmmaking to recreate events that haven't been caught on camera.

P: What do you feel that you learned about collaboration and why is it essential to your work?

C: Working with a cast and mixing actors and non-actors requires me to collaborate in a very different way of having to respond to the various need of the cast based on their experience. As the project itself explores liminality on so many levels - between art and film, reality and fiction and even its thematic - not fitting in, it's appropriate that a mix of people compose the cast. Working in this way, it gives a project a special sort of energy, non-professionals add unpredictability as they are not acting in the same way as actors do, they add a bit of reality. They also bring an awkwardness to the screen, and in real life, we are much more awkward than the characters we are used to consuming on screen.

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<sup>234</sup> BEAM REACH BLASTING was a collaboration with musician Chris Sharkey. See *Chapter 8: Conclusion*.

<sup>235</sup> At the time of this interview I was reading Elisabeth Cowie's *Recording Reality, Desiring the Real*, and I used her definition of documentary to place Rules of Engagement. "Documentary is the re-presentation of found reality in the recorded document, its truth apparently guaranteed by mechanical reproduction of that reality in what has come to be known as its indexical relationship to the original." Elisabeth Cowie, *Recording Reality Desiring the Real* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011) pp. 20.

P: *I know that is true, I remember seeing a film from Ken Loach on the Spanish Civil war where an actor hesitated, and I remember at the time finding it really remarkable because you don't usually see people hesitate.*<sup>236</sup>

C: That's true, and many filmmakers work with non-actors to achieve these real moments on screen. I want to draw attention to the unnaturalness of 'natural' acting.

P: *The idea of de-saturation comes through in your work in other ways as well? You create these solid frameworks with the use of the sound and the camera as well, but then you really strip things back.*

C: It's about stripping back to highlight and draw attention to the construction of moving image narrative and its relationship to real reality. Media saturation of everyday environments play a big part of my work.

P: *In contrast to your previous work, Rules of Engagement is a film without dialogue, why did you decide it was going to be a film without speech?*

C: It felt like a very natural progression to take away the dialogue. By taking it away you remove what you would typically expect from narrative drama: speech. I discovered that without words you draw more attention to the image, and in turn, to the story and mood, you are creating, especially these mundane scenarios. Visual storytelling better conveys the unspoken social codes dealt with in the film, the dialogue would have distracted the viewer from to what might otherwise be missed. It was also a device, alongside the highly stylised look and heightened performances, to create a critical distance. Draw attention to our familiarity with narrative drama by de-familiarising it.

P: *I was wondering about if you were really interested in silent cinema?*

C: I didn't make the connection to silent film until I started working with the cast; there are similarities in the exaggeration in the performances, expressing things without words, Buster Keaton was a reference. I think the film does relate to silent cinema in the

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<sup>236</sup> *Land and Freedom*, Dir. Ken Loach, Artificial Eye, 1995.

sense that the narrative is stripped down yet dramatic. Silent cinema is neither silent nor void of speech, and the sound design is very heightened in *Rules of Engagement*.

## 7.6 Screening 5: The Tetley

The final screening dealt with the idea of narrative drama in the gallery context connecting it with the broader process and liminal position, screening works that had been presented in both galleries as well as cinemas. The screening and subsequent Q&A was hosted by Bryony Bond, artistic director of The Tetley. The selection included *Parallel*<sup>237</sup>, *In Waiting*<sup>238</sup>, *SYSTEM*<sup>239</sup>, *The Case*<sup>240</sup> and *Rules of Engagement*<sup>241</sup>.

Bryony Bond: *I wanted to kick off with this tour; we're the final stop. What have you gathered from touring this work, screening all of these works together? And taking them around in different spaces and seeing them in different contexts? Have that made you think differently?*

Cecilia: First of all, it's has been great to see these works alongside each other. The screenings have all had different compositions, all included *Rules of Engagement* but centred on a theme, which the works explore. This screening is slightly different; I wanted to explore the practice and process behind the work as a whole, in a gallery context, which is especially apt as this [The Tetley] is an art gallery.

B: *There does seem to be a kind of progression from your earlier works, it was very dialogue rich to these much more recent films which are almost entirely silent apart from these very loud, rich Foley effects. You seem to have shifted more into creating atmospheres rather than dialogue. Is that fair observation?*

C: The funny thing is it's probably more text involved now than the earlier works. I wanted to create something that is much more open and ambiguous to an audience and something that can also exist outside of the cinema or black box context. When you have synchronised dialogue, you are much more sensitive to sound-bleed.

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<sup>237</sup> *Parallel*, Cecilia Stenbom, single screen film, 2016.

<sup>238</sup> *In Waiting*, Cecilia Stenbom, single screen film, 2014.

<sup>239</sup> *SYSTEM*, Cecilia Stenbom, single screen film, 2014.

<sup>240</sup> *The Case*, Cecilia Stenbom, single screen film, 2013.

<sup>241</sup> *Rules of Engagement*, Cecilia Stenbom, single screen film, 2018.



B: *It is also, I guess, a much more visceral experience, in that in your other works were more description of those kinds of feelings whereas your films now seem to be more about the themes you are exploring?*

C: I think I have become better at trusting the power of audio-visual storytelling. More showing rather than telling.

B: *You've talked about that they've been shown at film festivals and cinemas and then also in the gallery context, and I guess in some ways, by taking out that dialogue - and although it is still narrative it has got a beginning a middle and end - I could imagine with these films, no matter where you come in, you could walk in the middle of a screening and pick up the narrative in the same way. Is that something that you are considering when you are doing these works? For them to work in a gallery context as well?*

C: With *Rules of Engagement*, I set out to make a work that was not specifically for either a cinema or a gallery context but would draw from both fields. In a sense, this question, this hybrid position between fiction and reality is where the work sits, however uncomfortably. I am interested in how the process of filmmaking can be deployed to reveal critical insights into the transformation of lived experiences. I aim to do this via that hybrid position, between reality and fiction. Before making *Rules of Engagement*, I felt I was moving in a direction where things were getting very narrative, very A to B, and I wanted to break with that. I thought of the individual stories in the film as vignettes, short scenes or episodes, not as stories with a narrative arch. Each vignette is only about 7 minutes and, if you walk in in the middle of one, you would quickly understand what is going on, whereas if you are working on much longer format, showing in a gallery context is more complicated when it comes to the viewing experience. I want to make something that looks very much like narrative fiction and plays like narrative fiction, but the more you are watching it, the more you realise that it isn't. In the gallery context, you would not normally expect to see narrative drama, what happens then to the viewer's experience?

B: *Rules of Engagement* is very striking in the way it takes the snippets of each subsequent films into the scenes by including a screen/television. What's your thinking behind those little moments, why did you want to bring those in?

C: I brought the screen in a screen as a way to tie the vignettes together, connected through the act of consuming narrative. It was also an opportunity to bring in the element of music. I don't use soundtrack in the films, a bit of underscore but never full on music, but here I included a snippet of a television soundtrack into the screens, by doing that the music became diegetic sounds in the room as they came from the TV, whilst simultaneously working as non-diegetic music inside the screen; a subtle play with fact and fiction, contributing to the work to the all over aim of the work.

### **7.7 Summary: The Discussions & the Audience**

These conversations deliberately set out to explore and open up the questions I had set out to examine in the work. To capture the breadth of the enquiry, I decided to have these discussions across five different venues, with different audiences and different hosts.

The London discussion, which was put together around representations of the mundane and the everyday in the work, focused on the look, settings and performances, and how stylised environment and heightened performances can serve to make the familiar strange. The discussion at the CCA was based around the use of re-appropriation and why that was important to the work. This led to investigating the relationship between the construction of identity, social interaction and moving image narratives. The discussion at Tyneside Cinema focussed on the use of real-life testimony. The conversation surveyed the process behind the work, from gathering source material to working with actors. Interestingly this brought up the question of the relationship between the background research, the process informed by the research and the final film.

The screening at the Maltings was based on the use of both fictional and documentary approaches. The discussion touched upon the origins of the practice, the collaborative aspect of filmmaking and use of a mixed cast; professional and non-professional actors - all linking to the idea of using real and fictional sources. The screening at the Tetley in

Leeds - the only dedicated art venue in the entire series of screenings, was themed around the idea of narrative in a gallery context. The discussion revolved around the development of the work (more ambiguous, less linear) and how it operates in between a cinema and an art context.

The post-screening conversations were an opportunity to gauge what the audience did not pick up. It became clear that the process behind the work was more or less invisible to the audience and, without prompting, they didn't identify the structural references of the work (apart from Philip Ilson who alluded to soap opera). The idea of documentary re-construction didn't seem to filter through, nor that the scenarios were based on 'true stories'; it became clear that *Rules of Engagement* was perceived as a fictional drama.

Which ideas, concepts and approaches did the audience engage with? The concept of conformity was brought up in London which linked to thinking around the persuasiveness of the moving image, cultural hegemony and to the thematic exploration of *Rules of Engagement*; social protocols. The question of autobiography was brought up in Glasgow: mainly if the work was concerned with the idea of Northern-ness; there has always been a clear link between my life and the themes in the work - although it has never been explicitly explored.

The removal of dialogue caused the most significant reaction amongst the audience; it was brought up at every single screening (although not included in all the extracts above). Philip Ilson noted that the previous work "*created a mood with the dialogue and now the mood was created by the lack of speech*", whereas Bryony Bond was wondering if the new work is about "*creating an atmosphere rather than dialogue?*", Harriet Warman pointed to "*a deeply frustrating feeling of watching a film where people are not talking*", and Michael Pattison mentioned the experience of frustration over the lack of dialogue and the extra work demanded on the spectator. Peter Taylor made a link to silent film. In addition to the comments from the screenings, I should also add that most people who have seen the film have mentioned the lack of speech.

Did the work function in terms of the questions it set out to explore? Perhaps, but maybe in different ways than I had anticipated. I believe that the approaches mentioned above

successfully highlighted the thematic exploration of the work; the unwritten social protocols that govern social interaction.

One of the key intentions of *Rules of Engagement* was to trigger an audience reaction - a reconsideration of narrative content by subverting the familiarity of drama. Of the approaches that I used to achieve this - stylisation, heightened performances, re-appropriation of narrative screen construct, it was the deliberate removal of dialogue that had the most direct impact on an audience. More importantly, the removal of dialogue created a gap in the audience's expectations, which caused some frustration, but it was also an opportunity to engage differently with the work and even to consider filmmaking as a tool for blurring and complicating the boundary between reality and representation of reality.

## Chapter 8: Conclusion

I commenced this research with three core propositions and approaches: firstly, *screen representations of the real/reality are not binaries*; secondly, *a recollection is a narrative version of an event*; and thirdly, *de-familiarisation can be a tool to critically explore both dominant screen-based narratives and the everyday*.

As the research progressed, a more complex relationship between reality and screen-based versions of reality emerged; reality and narrative fiction are not just connected - they are fully inter-woven. Narrative is part of daily lives; our memories are narrativised accounts of events, our future projections are fictional, and our conversations consist of stories, anecdotes and recollections. Furthermore, narrative filmmaking is anchored in reality, not just through stories that emerge out of real life – either directly or indirectly - but that the process of filmmaking itself connects and interacts with the real world as it is constrained by resource.

The core focus of the research is narrative filmmaking although not necessarily placed exclusively in the cinematic context. As the project developed, and the meticulous recording of the process followed, it became clear that the moving image's inherent ability to simultaneously tell stories - fictional and real, as well as record actual events – as a witness, is key, and that the work tries to harness both of these abilities.<sup>242</sup>

### 8.1 Critical Junctions & Connections

To conclude this research project I wanted to reflect upon the connections between the distinct junctions of the process, represented each by a chapter, presented in this text:

Critical dialogue, based on actual conversations, flank the text; firstly, the conceptual foundation of the work explored in *Conversation*, and secondly, the public dissemination in *Questions and Answers*, which questions if the work function in terms of the questions it set out to investigate. Both conversations lay out and dissect the entire project as a

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<sup>242</sup> This idea is brought up by Erica Balsom in writing about the aforementioned *The Casting* by Omer Fast, she writes about gallery based works “*that interrogates a tension central to cinema: the tension between referentially and representation, between a fidelity to the world and a fictionalisation of it.*” Erica Balsom, *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013) p. 152.

whole, at the beginning phase and the final cut. These crucial dialogues, occurring as they do at both ends of the filmmaking process, serve to examine the connections within the parameters of my broader practice as well as contextualising the work around other works and methods.

To capture parts of the process that span over a longer period of time – development and editing, I created semi-fictional exchanges in *Conversation* and *Notes*. Both of these phases are crucial as the decisions made shape and form the final work. Whereas *Conversation* deals with the foundation of the work, *Notes* digs into the process of narrative storytelling. Both processes were informed and partially driven by the overall enquiry: the blurring of the real and representation.

The two chapters *Source* and *Recollection*, recall a real event; firstly the experiences that this film was based on and secondly the moment of re-enacting these events in front of the camera. The source material for this film was captured on tape during informal conversations. The recollections were captured in a similar relaxed setting. In the same way that the lens mediates reality, and our memories are mediated versions of real events, both chapters capture the mediation rather than seek to create an objective representation of reality.

This text interrogates the construction process of a story, firstly, by putting together a narrative based on memory in *Source*, and secondly, by arranging images and sounds together into a comprehensible narrative in *Notes*. Both chapters are concerned with the subtraction and simplification that occurs in narrative storytelling; what and how much information and detail can be left out to tell a comprehensible story?

*Rules of Engagement* is based on real-life testimony recapped in *Source* and actual screen-based references used laid out in *Blueprint*; both chapters explore the merging of reality with fiction and specifically explore how real-life scenarios are interwoven with screen-based representations of reality. *Recollection* further considers how these real-life experiences and screen-based references are re-interpreted by the actors.

*Recollection* and *Notes* both touch on the different temporal realities associated with the process of filmmaking. *Recollection* deals with the moment the actor is representing a

past event on screen, and *Notes* explores how the editing process is set between the realities: the material captured, the reality of the edit suite at hand, and the film that it will become. It is perhaps here, where the process is lodged between these temporal realities, that the real and representations of reality are at their most intertwined.

The familiar constructs referenced and appropriated were laid out in *Blueprint*, explored through fiction in *Notes*, and examined in *Questions & Answers*. The use of appropriation links to the idea of the use of de-familiarisation to critically explore both dominant screen-based narratives and the everyday. I concluded from the responses gathered during the period of editing as well as the public screenings that the familiarity with the constructs I had re-appropriated was not explicit enough to register with the audience.

## 8.2 Liminal Screen-based Practices

*Rules of Engagement* is a narrative work that does require a viewer's attention, which may not be attainable in an installation context, and at the same time, its rigorous conceptual foundation may perhaps be missed in a cinema screening context.

This research has been positioned within liminal screen-based practices - a field that encompasses a vast field of moving image production and exhibition. Perhaps it would have been desirable to narrow the field down for focus and clarity? A way to define this liminal field could be to focus on the context in which it is shown; for example, Erica Balsom, writes about 'Othered Cinema' - the exhibition of cinema in the gallery context, tracing the etymological meaning of the work exhibit to "*the presentation of something for exhibition.*"<sup>243</sup> Balsom makes a valid point about how the context can yield a different kind of engagement. However, this way of classifying screen-based practices does not encompass the relationship between moving image, narrative and affective experience, which is central to my investigation.

Another way to narrow the field down is labelling the different mode of practice; for example, Jonathan Walley, puts the perceived distinction between avant-garde filmmakers and artist film/video down to the difference in production, distribution,

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<sup>243</sup> Erica Balsom, *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013) p. 13.

exhibition and the aesthetics of the works themselves.<sup>244</sup> Walley doesn't disregard the 'cross-fertilisation' that occurs between avant-garde filmmakers and artists; he writes, "*while the two modes of film practice in the avant-garde may [...] spiral around each other without ever quite meeting, the individuals who operate within these modes have more freedom of movement.*"<sup>245</sup> As valuable it may be to categorise practices against set definitions, it could be argued that some of the above definitions could be used to categorise the curators and programmers of film and moving image rather than pigeonholing the works and practitioners. *Rules of Engagement* is connected to both the conventions of artist film/video and narrative filmmaking; its approaches in terms of development and execution can be attributed equally to both modes of practice, and I therefore have not sought to narrowly define the parameters.

This text has not dealt with the context of exhibition or screening and what those two different contexts entail. Instead of considering what the work is *for* (gallery or cinema), a future enquiry could consider what happens to the experience and reading of the work in these different contexts. It is important to note that this project explores liminality, and the intention was to create a work that does not necessarily conform to the expectations of either a gallery-based project or narrative short film.

### **8.2.1 Screening Format**

The affective experience of my work is essential and, I would argue, central to the experience of cinema. The theatrical screening space has a long-standing history of creating an emotional connection between spectator and narrative.<sup>246</sup> To gauge the emotional connection with the film, it was appropriate to first present the work in a spacio-temporal context similar to the conventional cinema experience. However, all through the process, I considered the implications of installing the work within the gallery context. The question of the gallery context could achieve a similar emotional connection with the viewer goes beyond this enquiry, but it is interesting that Bryoni

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<sup>244</sup> Jonathan Walley, 'Modes of Film practice in the avant-garde' in Leighton & Esche (eds.) *Art and the Moving Image: A Critical Reader*. (London: Tate Publishing in association with Afterall, 2008) pp. 182-199.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>246</sup> The affective experience of cinema is prominent within cognitive film theory, for example, Plantinga & Smith begins their book *Passionate Views* with "*The cinema offers complex and varied experiences; for most people, however, it is a place to feel something.*" Plantinga & Smith (eds.) *Passionate Views - Film, Cognition and Emotion* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1999), p 1.



Bond – an art curator, considered the possibility of encountering the film in a gallery context: *“by taking out that dialogue - and although it is still narrative it has got a beginning a middle and end - I could imagine with these films, no matter where you come in, you could walk in the middle of a screening and pick up the narrative in the same way.”*

Ironically, via the process of critically appraising my methodology, I have returned to my original intention, that the work should be critically disseminated in both the gallery and the cinema context. *Rules of Engagement* has been screened in both these contexts; however, at the time of writing, it has not been installed as part of an exhibition.

### **8.2.2 Alternative Exhibition Formats**

As mentioned above, *Rules of Engagement* has not been installed as part of an exhibition. In late 2018, I developed an as-yet unrealised proposal for an exhibition version of the work presented over three screens, each vignette on their own screen, and each edited down to seven minutes and synchronised. The idea was to install the work within the same space on three independent screens placed around the room (not side by side), with the sound deliberately bleeding and blending. Installing the work this way would relinquish any control of the audience, as they would be able to come and go as they please. I would not install any seating and therefore invite a less linear and more fleeting engagement with the work. It is crucial for the work to retain a cinematic scale and feel; therefore the vignettes should be scaled-up and projected, and not shown on a monitor.

An idea for the future is to release the work as three separate vignettes online, on various platforms, in order for it to be shared alongside other content. This kind of presentation would remove the work from both the cinematic and gallery context altogether and would have the potential to become an incongruous interruption to someone’s everyday life – perhaps even more suited to its original intention, that of interrogating the blurred boundary between screen reality and real reality. This kind of online presentation would be easy to monitor with regards to reach, but would be much harder to gauge in terms of what kind of audience engagement these films would have.

### 8.3 Parallel Projects

*Rules of Engagement* was not a project that occurred in a vacuum; other activities and works have emerged from this period of focused research, which has naturally fed into this enquiry as well as contributed to future explorations. *Parallel*<sup>247</sup> was a commission to respond to connections between North East of England and my native Sweden. The project explored similarities between cinematic landscapes by transposing and re-imagining scenes from one place to another, from UK to Sweden and vice-versa. The work took its starting point from scenes taken from film and television. The original commission was for a work without sound, and in the re-enactment of the scenes, the performers were asked to hold a pose without speaking. The resulting film was a revelation to me in the power of silence by removing speech from moving images that normally would be expected to contain dialogue. When the work was later re-edited for a group exhibition, I added sound to the work, which consisted of Foley effects that re-creating diegetic environment alongside a subtle underscore.

Also overlapping with the period of making *Rules of Engagement* was *BEAM REACH BLASTING*<sup>248</sup>; this was a result of a week-long sea voyage across the North Sea where I was commissioned, alongside musician Chris Sharkey, to create a response to the journey. The result was a 17 minute-long audio-visual poem. The project forced me to work in an entirely different way to which I am accustomed: operating the camera myself, co-authoring a work with another practitioner and using real life unfolding in front of me as both subject and story material. The project served as an eye-opener to the potential of using real life, documented through an observational approach, as a material with which to produce fiction.

Working within an academic structure, with both the resources and the limitations that it imposed, led me to consider the role of the individual in an institutional setting. In late 2017, I was invited to Chapter Arts in Cardiff to develop a new work during a 2-month residency. The project resulted in the work *Diem*<sup>249</sup>, which looked at non-verbal interaction at workplaces, captured through an observational documentary approach. The purpose of the film was not to explain, but was to capture the environments and

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<sup>247</sup> *Parallel*, Cecilia Stenbom, single screen film, 2016.

<sup>248</sup> *BEAM REACH BLASTING*, Cecilia Stenbom & Chris Sharkey, single screen film, 2017.

<sup>249</sup> Currently in post-production.

interaction in these institutional structures, investigating the tension between individual and institution.

#### **8.4 The Future**

Looking ahead and with the project of deconstructing the process of making *Rules of Engagement* behind me, an interest in incorporating observational documentary with semi-scripted elements has emerged. As part of this new direction, I want to expand the work beyond the short film format and develop a narrative situated in the mundanity of everyday life that can sustain the feature-length format. I have already mentioned *Breathing Space* (working title), an idea for a semi-fictional film based around the premise of professional role-play in a story loosely linked to my autobiography as a Swede living in the North East of England. Instead of the unwritten rules of interaction, this project examines the roles that we act out in work, and in social and domestic life. For this project I am keen to break with the conventions of scripted fiction; instead of developing this as a screenplay I want to develop the treatment as a story outline with defined scenes and populate them using role-play and simulation and to co-write the film with the cast. Furthermore, for the in-between contextual scenes, I want to work with members of the public who will be asked to go on with their lives in front of the lens, mixing constructed drama with real life.

Exploring the relationships between documentary, fiction and autobiography, as well as focusing on non-scripted approaches to fiction, will be an area of more in-depth focus post-PhD study. If *Rules of Engagement* asked how filmmaking can blur and complicate the boundary between real life and screen-based representations thereof, this new project looks at how a story can be written via simulation; and again, how captured reality can be used in the construction of fiction. Another future area of focus is the work's relationship to cinematic realism and the tension between realistic and heightened representations of characters and themes.

An ulterior motive to undertake this research, perhaps, was to better place the work either within the art context or narrative cinema. As a result of this research, I have discovered that the work is situated directly in the space between the two.

An important question to consider is why it was important to do this research and why now? Storytelling through the means of the moving image is an art form well over a century old, and the two major forms of mass distribution – cinema and television, have been declared dead many times over. Therefore, what has been the urgency to deconstruct a process that hasn't changed much throughout its history? My answer would be, that although the medium and process I have interrogated, that of narrative filmmaking is old, the question I sought to unpack – the intertwining of reality and fiction, real and representation in everyday life, remains relevant today and always. Audio-visual storytelling should be interrogated with as much rigour and respect as literature and text.

This project sought to deconstruct the question through a practice-led methodology, one which did not just seek to produce a new work of art but also a document that attempted to dissect the process behind it, drawing out thinking, reflections, documentation, narratives and new fictions from it.

Reality is not book-ended by a beginning, middle and end, and in the same way neither is the research that underpins *Rules of Engagement* and the broader practice around it. This text has functioned as a vehicle through which this research has been formulated, contextualised and book-ended. To disseminate a practice-led process, as an artist/filmmaker through the framework of doctoral research, has enabled me not just to express and formulate critical ideas that I set out to explore, but also to drive and push the practice in new and unexpected directions.

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*Game of Thrones* (2011-present), created by David Benioff & D. B. Weiss, produced for HBO. [TV-Drama].

*Rescue911* (1989-1996), Produced for CBS Paramount Network Television. [Reality TV series].

*Scenes from a Marriage* (1973), written by Ingmar Bergman, produced for Sveriges Television. [Mini drama series].

*The Walking Dead* (2010-present), developed by Frank Darabont, produced for AMC. [TV-Drama].

